

ISSUE Nº 23
MAR-MAY
2015

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EYES WITHOUT A FACE

H.P. Lovecraft's
WEIRD 'WEST' TALES

Jack Hill Talks
SPIDER BABY

'TWIN
DOCTORS

JEN & SYLVIA SOSKA DISSECT
THEIR GROWING BODY OF WORK

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une production **JULES BORKON**

PIERRE BRASSEUR
ALIDA VALLI

dans

LES YEUX SANS VISAGE

UN FILM DE
GEORGES FRANJU

D'après le roman de **JEAN REDON**
ÉDITIONS DU FLEUVE NOIR (Paris)

Adaptation de **BOILEAU - NARCEJAC**
JEAN REDON • CLAUDE SAUTET
Dialogue de **PIERRE GASCAR**

JULIETTE MAYNIEL
ALEXANDRE RIGNAULT
BEATRICE ALTARIBA
ET
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CINÉMA

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*Engage your heart, your mind and
your taste for terror...*

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HOW BITTERSWEET THAT this issue of *Diabolique* is the last in which we fill our pages cover-to-cover with a focus on a singular theme.

Although the issues that will follow our 23rd will give special attention to recurring ideas, we will take a breath of fresh air from the limitations wrought by *uniform* coverage of such topics as Horror-Comedy, Apocalyptic Fiction, Dysfunctional Families, Home Invasion, or Pregnancy. While I'm confident that our decision to move beyond this theme-centric chapter of our history will expand *Diabolique's* potential, I consider myself lucky to deliver our readers one final wall-to-wall theme issue: Medical Horror.

The road to this issue has been long.

In May of 2013, just as I became *Diabolique's* Editor-in-Chief, I was misdiagnosed with a bacterial infection and misprescribed the antibiotic Ciprofloxacin, whose two-week long use landed me in the emergency room with what doctors could only describe as "toxic psychosis." Bedridden, pained, and mentally fogged for weeks, I visited additional doctors who dismissed the possibility that my side-effects could be long-term, or, what I often feared, permanent. Months later, a decision to see a doctor who specialized in tick-borne illnesses led to a test that would determine my condition was, in fact, caused by Lyme Disease and its co-infection, Babesiosis.

More months, more doctors, more treatment, anger, confusion, frustration, dread, sadness. Through it all, there was the support of family and friends—especially the constant, near-overbearing care of my Grandmother, Garyn Weinstein. I weathered the worst, coped with what remained, headed off to Brooklyn and began pursuing my Masters in Cinema Studies at New York University. Things clicked; the illness became an afterthought, dissipated when smashed into the brick wall of city life.

With *Diabolique* to edit, much of my days and nights would be spent orchestrating a timeline that would enable multiple issues to blend into one another according to their themes. When the timeline would inevitably reach Medical Horror, I mused, I

would exact my vengeance upon the medical community, rail against its injustices, the decisions of its doctors that endangered my health and, in turn, my livelihood.

Well, now we're here. My Grandmother, a source of my resilience that led me to this point, has passed away. A sudden onset of brain cancer claimed her otherwise pristine health in under a year's time. I sat as a surgeon successfully removed her tumor, which would redevelop despite his efforts. My mourning of her loss has transformed the vengeful incentive for the creation of this issue into a measured understanding of what makes illness, medicine, surgery, doctors, so frightening: illness reminds of mortality; medicine is a double-edged sword; surgery ascribes its performers God-like status; and all the while, doctors are merely mortal men and women. They do their best, uphold and belie their reputations.

Each of the articles in this issue speak to these truisms. Christopher Bruno and Joe Yanick, in their considerations of *Eyes Without a Face* and *The Skin I Live In*, critique surgeons' unchecked power. Jake Whirtner's look at the real-life science of Stuart Gordon's *Re-Animator* dissects the implications of "brain-death" and the revival of clinically dead organisms. My takes on "Herbert West-Reanimator," H.P. Lovecraft's short story series that provided the source material for Gordon's film, and Jack Hill's cult classic, *Spider Baby*, both make the case for Medical Horror's expression of the deterioration of the family, whether experienced by the former's author or the latter's on-screen Merrye clan. Weighing in on Jen and Sylvia Soska's growing body of work and Tom Six's *Human Centipede* trilogy, Colin McCracken and Kyle Turner call attention to the grisly pitfalls of limited or misplaced medical knowledge.

So, before it breathes its last breath and *Diabolique* is born anew, let's make like Herbert West and once more give our theme era...*life!*



Max Weinstein
Editor-in-Chief

Dedicated to Garyn Beth Landis Weinstein (1942-2014) and those struggling with mysterious or thus far incurable illnesses.

Diabolique

FRIGHT FROM THE CRENSHAW

By Chris Hallock



THE DUKE OF BURGUNDY

(Dir: Peter Strickland)

THIS SULTRY FOLLOW-UP to Strickland's acclaimed debut, *Berberian Sound Studio* (2012), is a period-piece soaked in the aesthetic sensibilities of '70s erotic cinema, but with an idiosyncratic flair we've come to expect from the director's unique point of view. It's a story where BDSM factors as the primary means of intimacy shared between Cynthia (Sidse Babbett Knudsen), who studies butterflies and moths in her spare time, and Evelyn (Chiara D'Anna), her demanding lover. The couple live isolated in a mansion in a small British village, and are involved in a relationship based on role-play and kinkiness that at one turn, nurtures their love, yet complicates their feelings for one another.

Strickland neither cheapens things nor takes a judgmental stance; he instead focuses on the tender aspects of their relationship rather than the potential for shock value. It's an admirable stance for someone at the helm of a film featuring bondage and urination as shows of affection! The result is a twisted love story

about the limits of what one partner will do for another desiring eccentric sexual fulfillment. *The Duke of Burgundy* features riveting performances, especially from Knudsen, who is hypnotic as the conflicted Cynthia. An evocative score by Cat's Eyes lends a playfulness to sequences that might otherwise be difficult to handle without a touch of whimsy. The final result is tamer than one might expect, but no less sensuous; it's a film imbued with ambiguity and a satirical tone bathed in visual and thematic richness throughout. By the climax, it is the viewer who submits to Strickland's penetrating vision.

DYS-

(Dir: Maude Michaud)

MONTREAL'S MAUDE MICHAUD has carved a niche for herself creating intimate, yet provocative films that explore lofty cultural issues facing women in the context of horror. *Dys-*, her first feature, is set against the backdrop of a viral outbreak whose infected victims exhibit violent and cannibalistic tendencies. Michaud avoids the typical trappings associated with apocalyptic horror, and instead focuses on the anxieties and insecurities of her characters, portrayed by Shannon Lark and Alex Goldrich. The couple perform horrible acts on one another as they disintegrate in a hermetically-sealed environment of a one bedroom apartment. There's a degree of ambiguity to challenge the viewer in determining whether their destructive behavior is exacerbated by the virus's effects, or the result of their own neurosis. By focusing on the internal, Michaud takes the viewer to very dark places free of the compromise normally dictated by tight budgets.

SPRING

(Dir: Justin Benson and Aaron Moorehead)

ON THE HEELS of their groundbreaking hit, *Resolution* (2012), Justin Benson and Aaron Moorehead return with *Spring*, a magnificent creature film with a robust, and very human, romantic component. After the death of his mother, Evan (Lou Taylor Pucci) impulsively takes a trip to coastal Italy to escape his floundering life. He falls head-over-heels for Louise (Nadia Hilker), a charming, but enigmatic woman he encounters while absorbing European culture. Evan enters into a doomed relationship when it's later revealed that Louise harbors a sinister affliction.

Benson and Moorehead could have phoned in a clichéd take on *Species* (1995), but instead craft a delightfully intelligent and thoughtful character piece reminiscent of Richard Linklater's "Before" trilogy (*Before Sunset*, et al), only populated with a monster that would make H.P. Lovecraft giggle with glee. The Baroque Italian setting lends a rich, almost alien atmosphere to the story, a wholly believable place for an ancient monster to stalk its prey in the darkened narrow streets. Moorehead's script is emotional and reflective without resorting to heavy-handedness. The film is so nuanced, in fact, that you may forget a creature is involved at all. Its refreshing to find a monster movie where one is not sitting impatiently wishing to skip over to the creature parts, but rather absorbed by the power of the entire experience. When the creature does strike, the terror is real because we care for the human beings in the story.



PALE GAZE

By Christopher Bruno

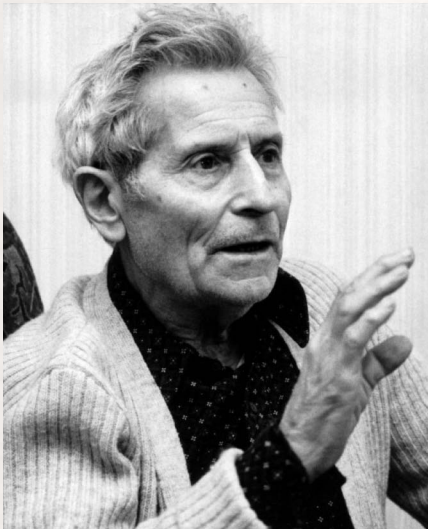
In Georges Franju's *Eyes Without A Face*, one doctor's perverse experiments are seen through his daughter's ghostly mask.

IF YOU WERE a horror fan in 1962, chances are you may have pulled into the Drive-In for a double feature being advertised as the "Mature Horror Show!" Sharing the bill with *The Manster*, a largely forgotten US-Japan co-production about a half-man half-monster with two heads, was *The Horror Chamber of Dr. Faustus*, an eerie, atmospheric slow-burner of a fright film which posters claimed had "a ghastly elegance that suggests Tennessee Williams," and which was "worthy of the great horror classics of our time." What you would have actually been seeing was a recut and English-dubbed version of *Eyes Without a Face*, a peculiar French import which had caused quite a stir when it premiered in Paris two years earlier. Though now regarded as an overlooked classic, in 1960 Georges Franju's lyrical and unsettling masterpiece was largely written off by critics as a pale pastiche of German Expressionism and Cocteau-inspired fabulism. The tale of an emotionally unstable doctor's efforts to help his disfigured daughter received decidedly mixed reviews in France, but had gained notoriety for an extended operation sequence which was so graphic that it reportedly caused several audience



members to faint and countless others to leave the theatre when it screened at the Edinburgh Film Festival. Franju, who was no stranger to unseemly subject matter, quipped, "Now I know





why Scotsmen wear skirts.”

The scene in question, which depicts the removal and transplant of one woman’s face onto the head of another, was not only exceptionally graphic for its time, but unfolded slowly and methodically with clinical precision, creating tension through protracted closeups of every step of the procedure. The content, as well as the presentation, was unprecedented in 1960. Though the gore is tame by today’s standards, *Eyes Without a Face* maintains its ability to disturb the viewer thanks to its precise and masterful control of pace and tone, its lush and evocative black and white cinematography, and its cunning subversion of the common mad scientist narrative. Franju, attempting to lend respectability to a genre which was often unfairly maligned in his home country, wove binaries like man/woman and science/nature into a rich, complex, and nuanced tapestry of moral ambiguity which still raises difficult questions for viewers

today. *Eyes Without a Face* explores guilt, grief, gender, and power, all through the relationship of doctor and patient, of a father and his daughter. But what is it about the medical profession (besides the preponderance of sharp objects) which makes it so perennially ripe for horror?

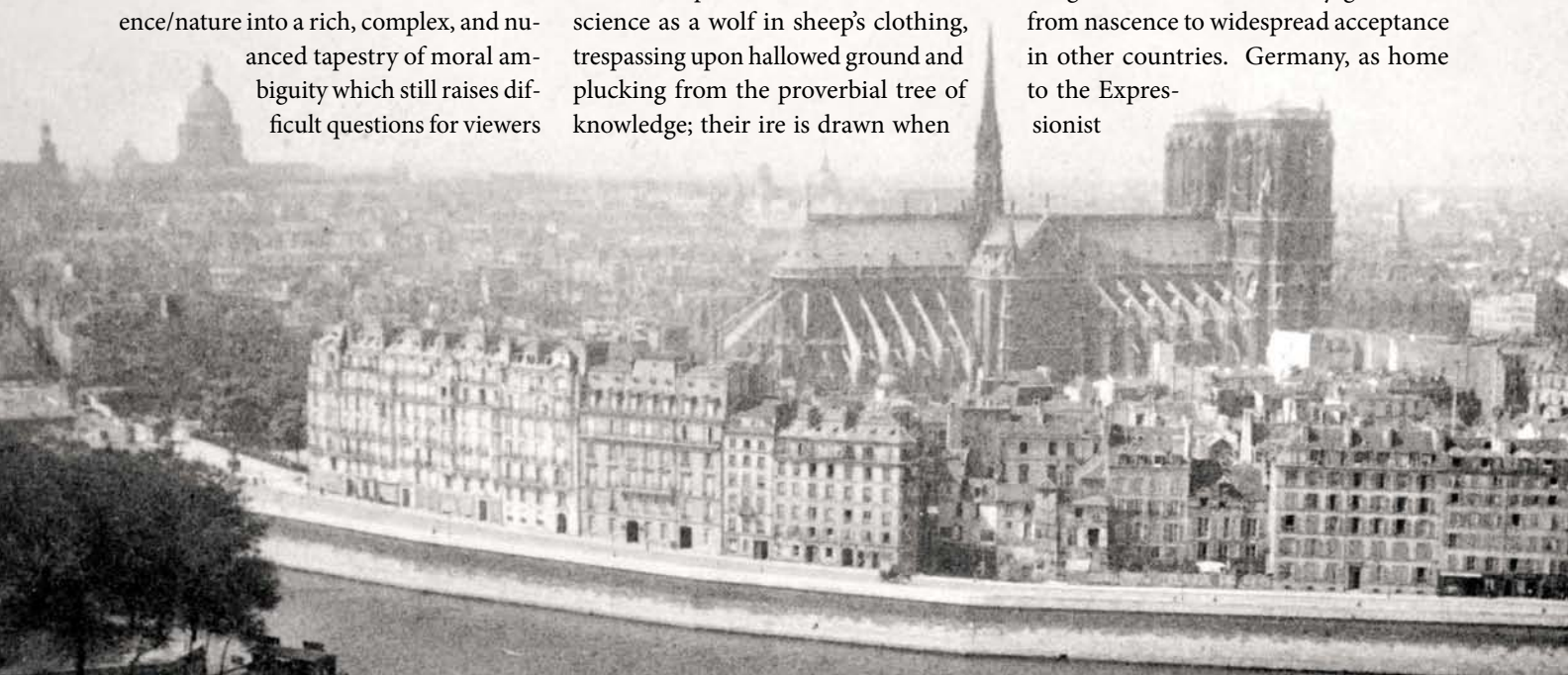
By and large, the public is accepting and supportive of the medical profession. A patient may have quibbles regarding a particular physician’s bedside manner or seemingly perpetual tardiness, but will generally accept some degree of beleaguering as endemic to the profession. Disregarding specific cases of mal-



practice, whether motivated or negligent, mass public dissent generally arises only when science dares trammel upon that which is deemed God’s domain. The pious of multiple denominations often view science as a wolf in sheep’s clothing, trespassing upon hallowed ground and plucking from the proverbial tree of knowledge; their ire is drawn when

modern medicine infringes upon what they consider the natural order, the cycle of birth and death preordained from the heavens, the flickering candle of life which is to be ignited and extinguished only by God’s will. The debate is most pronounced when lives are explicitly at stake: the public opposition to highly visible right-to-die crusaders such as minister-turned-agnostic Gerald Larue and the unfairly maligned (and convicted) Dr. Jack Kevorkian is illustrative, as are the instances of picketing, protesting, and sometimes even bombing which besiege abortion clinics across the nation. Perhaps even more significant than these extreme cases, however, is the hostility directed toward vaccination and stem cell research.

This moral grey area, especially when considered in light of Lord John Dalberg-Acton’s famous axiom that “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely,” adds resonance to one of the most enduring tropes of horror literature and filmmaking, that of the mad doctor or scientist. One of the greatest, most haunting and poetic examples of this subgenre is certainly the motion picture in question: Georges Franju’s masterpiece *Eyes Without a Face*. Originally released in France in 1960, at the tail end of the New Wave, the film was adrift upon arrival. Though France already had a rich history of surreal and fantastic cinema, they were slow to embrace the horror genre, which had already graduated from nascence to widespread acceptance in other countries. Germany, as home to the Expressionist





movement, possessed the richest history of cinematic horror, having provided such early classics as Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* in 1920 and F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* two years later. Universal Studios, meanwhile, produced popular adaptations of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923) and *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925), which prefigured their massive success throughout the 1930s and 1940s with the *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, *Mummy*, and *Wolfman* films. By the 1950s, England too had a distinct voice in cinematic horror thanks to Hammer Film Productions, which made Peter Cushing and Christopher Lee into household names.

France however, looked down upon horror as a lowly genre of little, if any, artistic merit and many of its critics wondered why a respected filmmaker such as Franju would debase himself by entering such an insipid milieu. Franju, who began making his own short films in 1948, received instant notoriety with *Blood of the Beasts*, a twenty minute black and white documentary which graphically depicts

the slaughter of cows, horses, and sheep in a Paris abattoir. Beyond the sensationalism of its content, *Blood of the Beasts* is noteworthy for its surreal juxtaposition of systematic violence with scenes of lyrical idyll, a technique he would recycle twelve years later on *Eyes Without a Face*. Based upon a novel by Jean Redon, Franju and his assistant director Claude Sautet wrote the screenplay for *Eyes Without a Face* with Pierre Boi-

leau and Thomas Narcejac, whose novels had inspired both the 1955 French thriller *Les Diaboliques* and Alfred Hitchcock's classic *Vertigo* from 1958. Producer Jules Borkon had acquired the rights to Redon's novel to compete with the profitable horror films being produced in England and America and offered the project to Franju. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Franju had no reservations about working in the horror genre, having been an admirer of the *fantastique* cinema of Méliès, Buñuel, and Murnau and writing at length about Fritz Lang.

Whereas most French filmmakers at the time would have balked at working in the disreputable realm of horror, Franju welcomed the chance to lend respectability to an unfairly maligned genre, and



the limitations imposed upon him became aesthetic virtues. The protagonist of *Eyes Without a Face* is Doctor Génessier (Pierre Brasseur), a renowned surgeon whose most recent fame has come from a new technique for skin transplantation called the heterograft. To the public, he has had some success with minor grafts from one dog to another, but in private he has been experimenting on human flesh in order to restore the face of his daughter Christiane (Franju's muse, Édith Scob) who was badly maimed in a car accident for which Génessier was responsible. Génessier's assistant Louise (Alida Valli, of *Suspiria* and *Inferno*) has had her own face repaired by Génessier and demonstrates her gratitude through unflagging loyalty, which includes abducting girls for Génessier's experiments and disposing of their bodies when surgical complications



be suppressed, Franju focused on the atmospherics and, with his co-writers, foregrounded the character of Christiane, whose eerily blank, masked appearance

scene (which, at six minutes, tested the permissiveness of censors with its gory clinical frankness), Scob's performance is *Eyes Without a Face*'s masterstroke.

In a 1983 interview with *Sight and Sound*, Franju declared that "melodrama is utter hypocrisy," since if "we want to protect the unfortunate heroine, we must first want her to be unfortunate," and it is undeniably true that much of *Eyes Without a Face*'s power to both entrance and unsettle comes from the indelible and iconic image of Scob seemingly floating through Génessier's villa like an unquiet spirit, one step removed from both life and death, her fate resting uneasily in the hands of her brilliant but misguided father. What really makes the images stick, however, is the sly manner in which Franju ultimately makes Christiane the most fortified and effectual character in the film, one of the many ways in which *Eyes Without a Face* upends and subverts genre conventions and, consequently, au-



prove fatal.

Though eager to jump into the increasingly graphic horror game, Borkon was acutely aware of the concessions his film would have to make to censors and issued Franju three restrictions tailored to the film's prospective markets: limit the amount of bloodshed to appease the French censors; avoid depictions of animal cruelty to not upset the British; and steer clear of the mad scientist stereotype, about which the Germans remain understandably touchy. Rather than bemoan the futility of constructing a film in which the three main elements must

infuses the entire film with an off-kilter and vaguely unsettling aura. The opacity and immobility of her expression keeps Christiane perpetually at arm's length, even as we want to sympathize with the burdened victim. Franju, who cast Scob in several of his films, often remarked that her ethereal quality was an inviolable factor in the success of their collaborations, and in *Eyes Without a Face*, her delicate, fragile beauty, coupled with her rigid movements and oversized dresses, reminds the viewer of nothing less than a life-sized doll. Even more so than the film's infamous skin removal



dience expectations.

In addition to the narrative conventions of horror, Franju borrows liberally from the visual and thematic aesthetics of German Expressionism, Film Noir, and the dreamlike narratives of Jean Cocteau, who would subsequently become one of *Eyes Without a Face*'s few contemporary supporters. The mix of styles results in a cinematic alchemy unique at its time and difficult to categorize. Franju himself preferred to call it "an anguish film," stressing that its focus on medical authenticity, its ambiguous approach to morality, and its psychological tug of war create "a quieter mood than hor-



ror, something more subjugent, more internal, more penetrating. It's horror in homeopathic doses." Most markedly in contrast to the typical horror film is Franju's back-grounding of both the murders and the police's subsequent investigation. Dis-

with Louise nervously disposing of the first victim's body, and the second occurs off camera. Additionally, neither death is actually a "murder" in the true sense of the word. The first victim dies from complications resulting from an unsuccessful attempt at a heterograft for Christiane. Edna (Juliette Mayniel), the second victim, survives the operation but later falls to her death from an open window while attempting to escape Génessier's villa. Génessier, who acts out of guilt for hav-

ing caused the accident which injured Christiane, in fact expresses remorse and anguish over the lengths to which he must go in order to restore his daughter's face—"I've done so much wrong to perform this miracle"—making it difficult to reduce his actions to those of a violent sociopath. Tell-



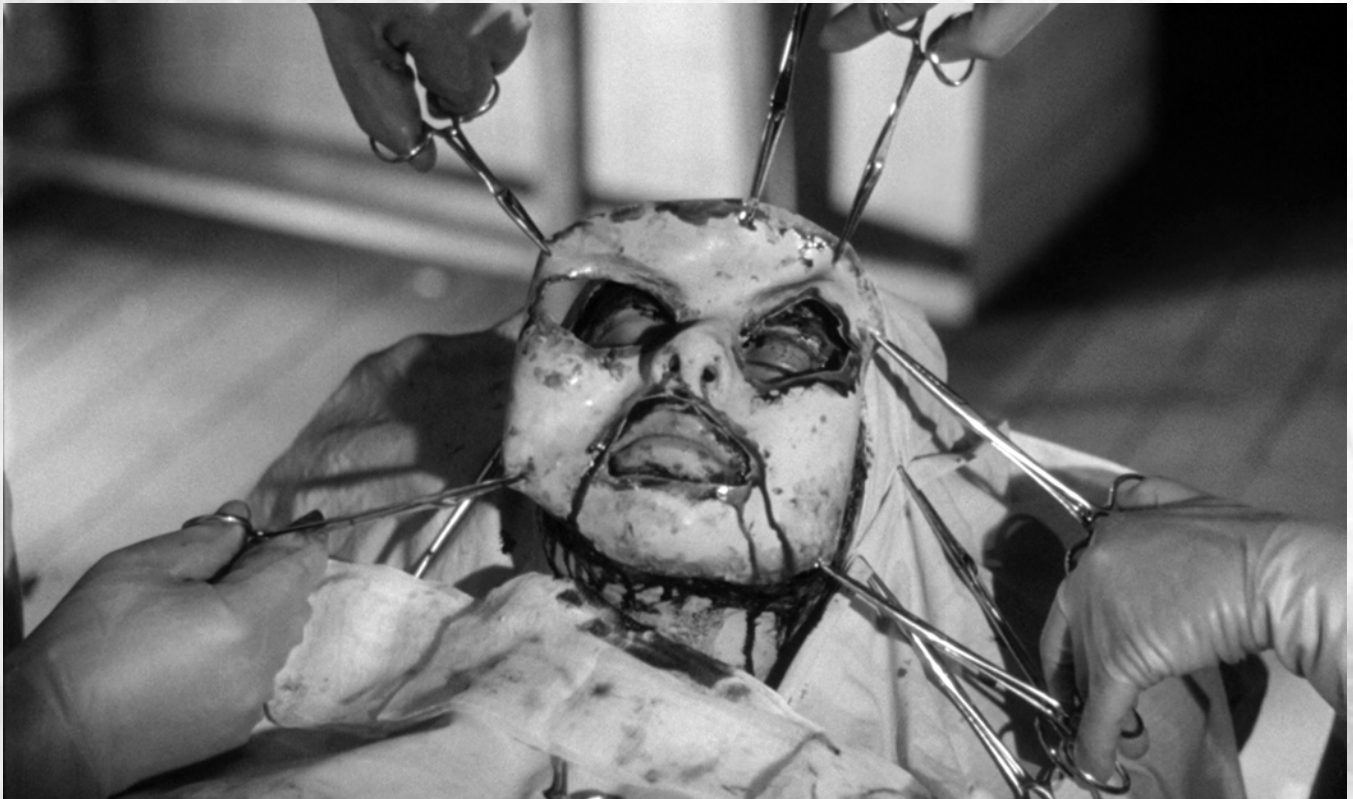
ror, something more subjugent, more internal, more penetrating. It's horror in homeopathic doses."

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counting Génessier's and Louise's own unfortunate fates at the film's end, there are only two murders, neither of which is depicted on screen. The first precedes the events of the film, which opens

ing, when the film was first released in America (abridged and redubbed), a brief scene of Dr. Génessier tending to a sickly young boy was omitted; though possibly cut for being superfluous to the primary narrative, its omission is more likely due to censors' unease with the villainous doctor being depicted in a sympathetic light.



Whereas almost all of the violence that surrounds Génessier can be considered incidental, a regrettable ancillary to his arguably noble, if misguided, goal of atoning for and reversing the harm inflicted upon his daughter, it is Christiane who commits the most decisive and pointedly violent actions in the film. Though the second heterograft initially appears to be a success, Christiane's body begins to reject its new face, depicted in a blunt, exceptional sequence of still frames that document the rapid deterioration of Christiane's counterfeit face. The clinical sobriety of the images—harshly lit close-ups which resemble mug shots—is matched by Génessier's dry and detached voiceover in which he recites medical jargon with all the warmth and candor of a lab report. The scene works narratively as

a tight condensation of time and action, but also thematically, as it reduces Christiane to a specimen, an object of study whose own emotional stake is overlooked in favor of statistics. Génessier presses on with his research, but the false promise of the short-lived heterograft is Christiane's breaking point and the third act of the film sees her reclaiming control of her destiny and breaking the cycle of violence and suffering initiated by her father's actions.

Génessier's third victim is actually a plant sent to his clinic by the police to assuage the suspicions of Christiane's grieving fiancé Jacques (François Guérin). Believing that Christiane is still alive, Jacques visits the officers investigating the disappearances of Christiane and Génessier's two victims. The officers

assure Jacques that all of their evidence only points down dead ends, but one detail sticks out: the description of a person with whom Edna was seen—a handsome woman wearing a pearl choker—matches that of Louise, who wears the necklace at all times to conceal the scar from the reconstructive surgery Génessier performed on her own damaged face several years prior. The police agree to send a girl, Paulette (Béatrice Altariba), to Génessier's clinic as bait. Génessier bites, but is wise enough to do so only after she has been discharged from the clinic, sending Louise to pick her up as she walks to catch the Paris-bound bus.

The police come to question Génessier about Paulette, but leave satisfied when his secretary tenders proof of Paulette's discharge. Meanwhile, in a hidden





“Brasseur’s excellent performance as Génessier is never pitched toward the histrionic extremes of a Doctor Frankenstein. Still, that prototypical Mad Scientist’s proclamation that, ‘Now I know what it feels like to be God,’ is clearly echoed throughout Eyes Without a Face.”

laboratory beneath her father’s clinic, Christiane capitalizes on the diversion, using a scalpel to cut Paulette free from the operating table, allowing her to escape the villa more successfully than her predecessors. Christiane later turns the blade fatally upon Louise, plunging it into her neck and reopening the wounds that Génessier had gone to such great lengths to repair. Christiane, then, moves into the adjacent kennel, where she frees the caged dogs on which Génessier has practiced his heterograft technique. Finally, she releases the white doves which encircle her in the film’s haunting final image, that of Chris-

tiane stepping past the dead body of her father, mauled by his dogs, and into the darkness of the forest.

Franju himself has indicated that the image of the doves around and upon Christiane is representative of her madness, and Stefanos Geroulanos writing about the film has likened her sudden and swift retaliatory assault to the transformation of “a figure of pain haunting the rational father’s circumstance” into an unbridled “fury at his failure.” There is, however, a deeper current of association between Christiane and the doves which hints at a greater overarching theme in the

film: that of the inefficacy of manmade institutions and the threat of technology. From the doves perched upon her hand in a portrait commissioned before her accident to those confined to a cage in the corner of her bedroom, Christiane is aligned visually with the elegant birds well before the film’s end. Christiane is herself a caged bird, a creature of purity and innocence who has had those very attributes stolen by forces beyond her control, forces which, significantly, represent technology and man’s efforts to overcome his limitations within the natural order: the automobile and medical science.

It may seem curious and perhaps contradictory to associate Christiane—who is responsible for no less than half of the deaths in the film and, pointedly, for those which were motivated and intentional—with purity and innocence, but through her homology with the doves and scenes implying a sympathetic and compassionate relationship with the dogs mistreated by her father, it becomes clear that Christiane and Génessier represent the binary relationship of nature versus science and, by extension, innocence versus knowledge. What makes the juxtaposition particularly subtle and affecting is that Brasseur’s excellent performance as Génessier is never pitched toward the histrionic extremes of a Doctor Frankenstein. Still, that prototypical Mad Scientist’s proclamation that, “Now I know what it feels like to be God,” is clearly echoed throughout *Eyes Without a Face*.

Dr. Robert S. Mendelsohn, a general practitioner who wrote extensively throughout the 1970s and ‘80s about abuses and injustices in the medical profession, was openly critical of what he saw as a God complex inherent in the practice. In *Male Practice: How Doctors Manipulate Women*, he wrote that, “During eight to 10 years of medical education and training, doctors are taught how to make you believe they are God,” and that many fall victim to the hubristic belief that they are superior to the natural law. He continued, “I’ve seen a lot of surgery performed because surgeons believe that God blundered mightily when He created the hu-

man physique. You're supposed to regard it as providential that they're around to repair God's mistakes." Dr. Frankenstein made explicit that his goals were not mere reanimation, but animation of the inanimate; his wish was not to fix God's mistakes but to replace God himself. Génessier's aims are, by comparison, more modest and more conceivable. When he rhetorically asks, "Is not the greatest of man's new hopes that of physical rejuvenation?" it is easy to picture a dedicated man of science and compassion who wishes to salve rather than inflict the pain of loss. He wishes not to fix God's mistakes—Génessier's own actions are the provenance of his family's misfortune—but he does nonetheless spite His will.

To everyone besides Génessier and Louise, Christiane is literally dead; after the body of his first victim was discovered, Génessier erroneously identified it as Christiane's to deflect attention (and suspicion) from his own (presumed) missing daughter. To Christiane herself, she is figuratively dead, dispossessed of both a face and an identity, in a kind of purgatory between existence and nonexistence.

In this regard, Génessier's attempts to restore his daughter's face are akin to Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead. *Eyes Without A Face's* religious overtones are subtly enforced by the careful choice of words by Franju and his screenwriters: Génessier refers to the short lived success of the second surgery as a "miracle," and Louise assures Génessier that Christiane "is happy this time. She has *faith*." Unlike Lazarus, however, whose resurrection is public, Christiane's rejuvenation is a private affair, and a return to public life for her would entail a rebirth rather than a restoration. This is not a simple matter of semantics; the subtle yet profound tension between the two is evident in the vague contradiction in Génessier's assertion that with her reconstituted face, Christiane "can start life all over again." It

is impossible for Christiane to simply embark upon a new life, but neither can she pick up where she left off. With or without her face, she is damned to perdition.

One of the first and most noteworthy works of art to express caution and skepticism about the increasing prowess of the medical profession was Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birth-Mark." The short story, first published in 1846, concerns Aylmer, a successful doctor who becomes obsessed by a small birthmark on his young wife's cheek. Because Georgiana is otherwise beautiful, having come "so nearly perfect from the hand of Nature," Aylmer fixates upon and is repulsed by the blemish, "the visible mark of earthly imperfection." Hawthorne, who distrusted organized religion but whose writings often contained a spiritual element, continued: "It was the fatal flaw

"Franju preferred collaborative pursuits to iconoclasm, but remained nonetheless distrusting of social institutions, a perspective evident in Eyes Without a Face's depictions of law enforcement and medicine."

of humanity, which Nature, in one shape or another, stamps ineffaceably on all her productions, either to imply they are temporary and finite, or that their perfection must be wrought by toil and pain." Aylmer convinces Georgiana to submit to the surgical removal of the birthmark, and her anguished exhortation to her husband—"While this hateful mark makes me the object of your horror and disgust, life is a burthen which I would fling down with joy,"—neatly encapsulates Christiane's unspoken torment.

Hawthorne, like his Transcendentalist brethren Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, believed strongly in the inherent purity and rightness of Nature. "The Birth-Mark" cautions mankind against presuming superiority over Her grand design. To apply the Judeo-

Christian terminology we have utilized thus far (and which Hawthorne cunningly avoids in favor of broader spiritual terms), Aylmer's folly—like Génessier's—is his eagerness to step into God's shoes. The operation to remove her birthmark costs Georgiana her life, a fate foreshadowed by a dream of Aylmer's in which he discovers the crimson trail of Georgiana's hand-shaped blemish reaches all the way down into her heart. The imagery is evocative in several interconnected ways. First, in that our imperfections are in fact the "hand-print" of God/Nature; second, that these variegated idiosyncrasies which offend our myopic sense of untarnished, symmetrical beauty are, as it were, "at the heart" of what makes us human; and third, that mankind is unable to comprehend the vastness of God's/Nature's design just as Aylmer is unable to view the sub-dermal infrastructure of Georgiana's birthmark which comprises a greater and more holistic harmony than the superficial accord which he believes it to have besmirched.

Elsewhere in his piece on *Eyes Without a Face*, Geroulanos also draws attention to the face as evidence of God's hand. Citing works by Emmanuel Levinas, Roland Barthes, and Henri de Lubac, who declared that the human face is "illuminated by a divine ray," Geroulanos writes that man's visage is "an imprint of God," and a "transparent guarantee" of "God's grace." In no uncertain terms, then, he aligns *Eyes Without a Face* with one of "The Birth-Mark's" central conceits. More significantly, however, his central thesis—that *Eyes Without a Face* is a metaphor for France's own post-war reconstruction—indirectly illuminates a particularly relevant subtext of Hawthorne's work: that of moral relativity. Eugenics, the lynch-pin of the Nazi ideology, is an extreme example of not only science's attempt to rewrite the laws of nature, but also of the puerile notion that man, in his



imperfection, could conceive of or create something of universally accepted perfection.

Génessier is of course miles removed from a Josef Mengele—he does not set out to exterminate, nor is there any flawed hierarchical social ideology fueling his research and experimentation. Films such as the Adolf Hitler pseudo-biopic *Max* and the recent Heinrich Himmler documentary *The Decent One* humanize the inhuman by respectively contextualizing and contradicting the generally accepted portraits of unfettered evil. What makes *Eyes Without a Face* chilling, beyond Franju and cinematographer Eugen Schüßler's masterful control of tone, is that Génessier needs no such qualifiers; motivated by grief and guilt, he is inherently sympathetic, despite the audience's reluctance to concede so. Though one cannot condone his actions, we regret them more than we are appalled by them. We recognize, through Génessier, how easily good intentions can spawn deplorable actions and how unlikely it is that humankind, in its nearsightedness, can gird itself from such lamentable outcomes.

Social Darwinism and Nietzsche's proverbial *übermensch* represent lofty ideals to which mankind can strive, but the eugenically inclined doctrines of Nazi Germany perverted their tenets into something more sinister. Génessier's actions are clearly not on par with those of the individuals who perpetrated the Holocaust, but in both cases the biased preference for one form of beauty over another results in a flagrant and profligate disregard for the rights and well-being of a subset of humanity unfairly targeted for attributes beyond their control. Génessier

may have not set out to kill, but neither does he abandon his charge once the severity of its consequences becomes clear. The unflagging precision with which he continues to realize his machinations despite escalating risk and casualty is itself an indictment of the insistent march of technological progress.

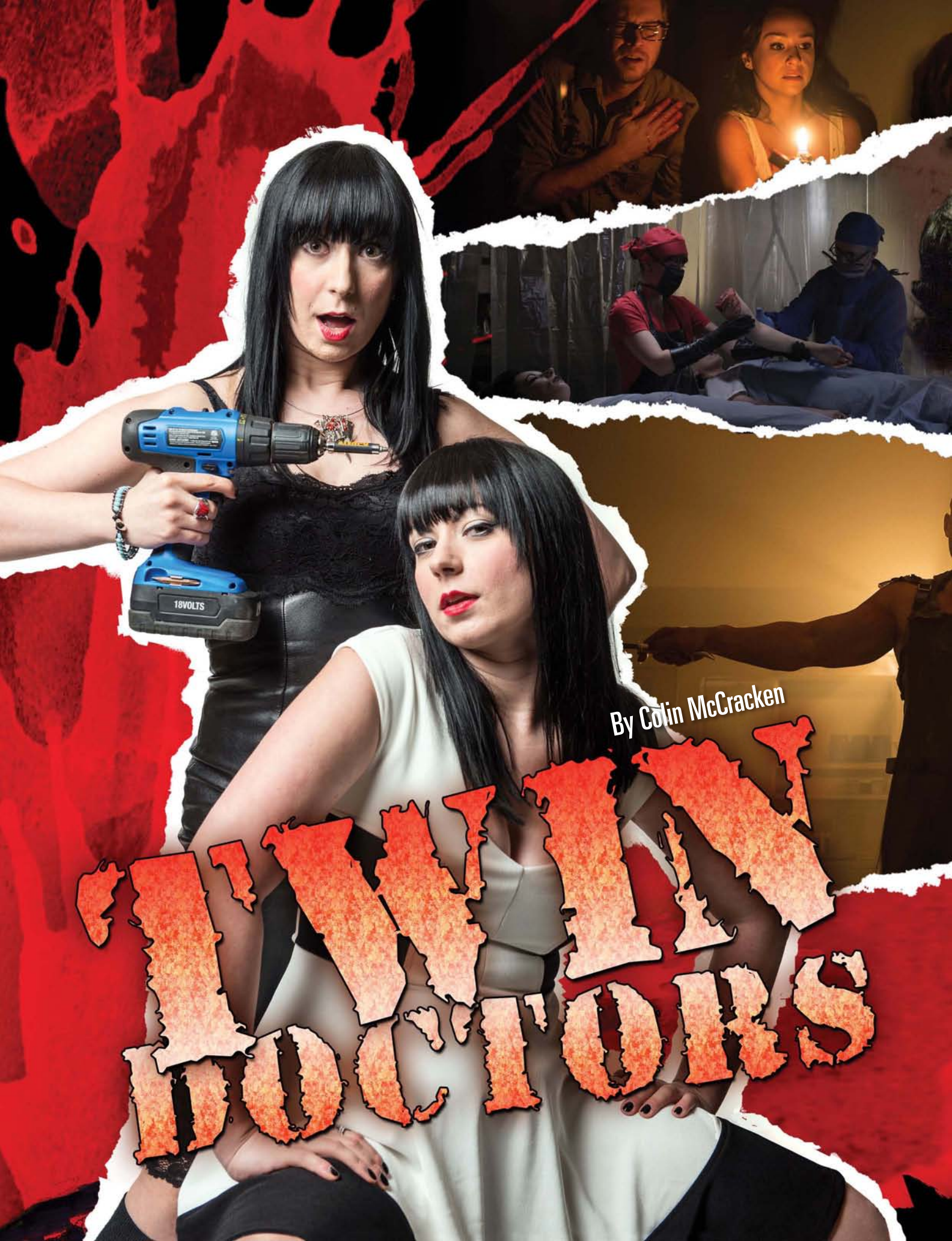
Franju preferred collaborative pursuits to iconoclasm, but remained nonetheless distrusting of social institutions, a perspective evident in *Eyes Without a Face*'s depictions of law enforcement and medicine. The police get off relatively easily; they are well meaning but ineffectual, unable to breach the surface of the mystery in front of them. Equilibrium is not restored by their feeble efforts, but rather through the release of Christiane's elemental fury and the triumph of nature over science. Her actions are an expression of madness, to use Franju's own term, insofar as they are both extreme and contrary to her own interests, but they do represent something greater and farther reaching. Her rebellion may not help her as an individual, but it does benefit the demographics with which she has identified herself: a woman, a victim, and an entity considered subhuman in the eyes of progress.

It is in fact the latter's uprising, in the form of the dogs' attack on their master, which strikes the final blow upon Génessier, stripping him of his own humanity by taking away both his life and his visage. It's a haunting image in any context, but acquires an added resonance in the France of 1960, which was still attempting to resuscitate its own identity following the German occupation of World War II, while simultaneously fighting a losing battle against the escalating Algerian insurgency. *Eyes Without a Face*'s skepticism that the tools of modernity could be used to repair that which they themselves had vandalized was thus endemic to its time and place, but remains relevant more than half a century later. Whether

it be pharmaceuticals with side effects worse than the symptoms they treat, the moral dilemma of sacrificing one life to save another, or even the broad pro-vs-con debates that surround our increasing reliance on connective mobile technology, the questions raised by *Eyes Without a Face* of moral relativity in technological imperatives are as hard to answer now as ever before. Incidentally, many of these ethical concerns were reintroduced to public debate in 2005 following the first successful face transplant. (In an eerie example of life imitating art, the recipient was a French woman whose face had been mauled by her black Labrador Retriever.)

Franju would frequently revisit the motif of masked or faceless crusaders, most notably in two films written by Jacques Champreux: his adaptation of Louis Feuillade's *Judex* and his final feature *Nuits Rouges*. None, however, had quite the bone-chilling and visceral impact of *Eyes Without a Face*. Much credit must be given to Édith Scob, whose quiet, confident performance and absent, aloof beauty elevate an already exemplary film. More haunting than the imagery, however, is the metaphor, the idea that we are all faceless in technology's gaze. Adam and Eve were warned not to eat the apple, but we are systematically taught to put our faith in progress. Often, we are so enraptured by modernity that we are blinded to its potential perils. If we are frightened by Dr. Génessier, it is not because we may confront him, but because we may become him.





By Colin McCracken

WALKING DEAD



FRESH OFF THE RELEASE OF THEIR FIRST FEATURE FOR WWE FILMS, SEE
NO EVIL 2, "TWISTED TWINS" JEN AND SYLVIA SOSKA EXPOUND
UPON THE MEDICAL HORROR TROPES OF THEIR
GROWING BODY OF WORK.

W

HILE THEY MAY have only scratched the surface of Medical and Body Horror within their work, Jen and Sylvia Soska have made an indelible mark upon the sub-genre. Their sophomore feature,

American Mary, took the indie world by storm in 2012, and remains a topic of analysis for film scholars the world over. The tale of a disillusioned medical student who turns her back on standard practices for the dark underbelly of clandestine body modification, *American Mary* asked some resonant questions about the pressures young people face, and of-

fered some poignant observations on the perceived nature of those whom society deems 'different.' In the film, revenge and retribution manifest themselves in a convergence of blood-soaked manipulation, all delivered with the precision of the surgeon's knife.

The Soskas' highly anticipated next film, *See No Evil 2*, is scheduled for an



October release through their new home at WWE Studios, with whom they have secured a deal to direct several features. *See No Evil 2* reunites the Soskas with *American Mary* star Katharine Isabelle, as well as Danielle Harris (star of Rob Zombie's *Halloween*), creating a female-led team which looks set to carve out a new format for the horror film, straying away from the archetypal 'ten little Indians' set-up of traditional slashers. WWE superstar Kane (Glenn Jacobs) reprises his role from the 2006 original (an underwhelming cookie-cutter directed by Gregory Dark), in which he is fueled by the new breath of life the Soskas have brought to the fore. The directors are well aware

of the faults which adorned the first installment, and have been meticulous in their avoidance of the standard genre pitfalls.

With so much riding on their next offering, it seemed like the perfect time to pick their brains. ...In a clinical and wholly professional manner, of course.

DIABOLIQUE: Many children are terrified of the doctor's office—of foul-tasting medicine or hospitals, while others experience an association through films or media which resonates and affects them. Can you remember the first time that you experienced a connection between the medical world and fear?

JEN SOSKA: Probably when we got vaccinations in Elementary School. I don't

like needles. The idea of a tiny sharp piece of metal being shoved into your skin, and into a vein either to put something into it or take something out of it is just disturbing and unpleasant, no matter how you look at it.

SYLVIA SOSKA: One of my earliest memories is of my mom being away at the hospital. What I didn't know is she was having surgery, but I could tell from how everyone was acting that it wasn't a good place to be.

DIABOLIQUE: The darkness, being alone in a unfamiliar place, strange creatures... All evoke primeval and in-





instinctual fears. Is the same is true of medical processes and procedures?

JS: I could see that. At one point in time someone decided to cut someone open and take a look inside and it just built from there. Of course, there's a science behind it, but that science is always evolving. The medical procedures of the past look like cruel and unusual punishment. I imagine ours will look much the same to future generations.

SS: Body horror is the realest horror out there. No one wants to be mutilated. No one wants to get cut open. No one wants to die. All those things happen in hospitals.

DIABOLIQUE: Do you think that the fear stems from a certain lack of control? To hand yourself over, physically and mentally to what is deemed to be a wiser, more capable person who can, for all intents and purposes, hold your life in their hands?

JS: No, I think it's from a fear of the unknown. If we knew we'd be okay, we wouldn't be afraid. Heck, if we knew when you died there is, without the shadow of a doubt, a Heaven, or afterlife, or reincarnation, we wouldn't be so scared. But we don't.

SS: Maybe, but it all leads to getting hurt; it's the risk of one's own body and life. Bad things happen in hospitals. Good things do too, but it's always the bad things that stand out.

DIABOLIQUE: Is this why the concept

works so well for genre films?

SS: There's more terror in an idea that keeps a foot firmly planted in reality. If you take something everyday and realistic, like medical horror, you have your audience and now you can start to torture them with the possibilities. All of the kills in *See No Evil 2* are things that can happen to you in a morgue; there are a lot of graphic and fun options.

JS: It's the pain and mutilation, and looming death. The unknown and the fear of dying. I think horror and hospitals have those elements in common. It's like they're made for each other.

DIABOLIQUE: The mythology of the monster, in certain cases, stems from our inability to accept those who are in some way born different than the rest of us. Take, for example, Tod Browning, whose film *Freaks* almost ended his career. Some might say for merely trying to portray the people in it as real—equal in emotional and intellectual capability as the rest of the populace—he was damned. Do you think that the psychology of the monster stems from an inherent fear

of those who are different?

SS: People have a long history of treating those that are different horribly. *American Mary* was hugely inspired by *Freaks*. We wanted to have real people from the body mod community in the film, but we also wanted to show them in a realistic way; not to villainize them, as is the trend in today's modern witch hunts for people who are different. People should know better, but they keep falling into the same bigoted pitfalls.

"ONE OF MY EARLIEST MEMORIES IS OF [OUR] MOM BEING AWAY AT THE HOSPITAL. WHAT I DIDN'T KNOW IS SHE WAS HAVING SURGERY, BUT I COULD TELL FROM HOW EVERYONE WAS ACTING THAT IT WASN'T A GOOD PLACE TO BE."

"NO ONE WANTS TO BE **MUTILATED**. NO ONE WANTS TO GET **CUT OPEN**. NO ONE WANTS TO DIE. ALL THOSE THINGS HAPPEN IN **HOSPITALS**."



JS: People fear what they don't understand. It's a lack of education and an abundance of ignorance. It should be the most basic lesson we learn as children that you can't judge a book by its cover and you can't look at someone and know them.

DIABOLIQUE: How has this been represented in genre throughout the ages? Can you think of any examples?

SS: The concept of monsters is ancient. They even exist in the Bible. Jen and I actually did a lot of research on monsters when writing our monster movie, *Bob*. I have a soft spot for misunderstood mon-

sters; *Edward Scissorhands* was my first introduction to that. I loved the underlying theme of not judging someone based on how they look.

JS: It's a classic story. *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. *Beauty and the Beast*. *Phantom of the Opera*. *Deadpool* [laughs].

DIABOLIQUE: With *American Mary*, you dealt with the issues of physical representation of the self, as well as social acceptance of alternative forms of intentional modification. What was your central philosophy behind this?

SS: We were lucky enough to have Russ Foxx on as a body modification artist to

keep realism in the film and make sure the community was being represented in a proper light. Everyone I have ever met from the body mod community is so kind and cool; I wanted to dispel the misinformation the unfamiliar may have with that group.

JS: Appearances are everything. Even if it's with regard to the idea of keeping up appearances. Mary dressing nice at school so no one knows she has no money, that kind of thing. Mary methodically applying her make-up like war paint, and her clothing like armour to hide the broken person beneath the surface. Take Lance appearing to be a dumb thug, but really being insightful and compassionate as another example. It's the appearances we



put on, and the appearances we want to show to the world. Everyone sees what you appear to be, few experience what you really are.

DIABOLIQUE: Did you feel that characters in the film such as Beatress Johnson (Tristan Risk) and Ruby Realgirl (Paula Lindberg) were viewed as monsters by most of the outside world?

SS: Yes and no. They were still very sexually pleasing to the eye, and that kind of cosmetic surgery tends to be very acceptable in today's world. With Masters FX, the look and the design of Beatress and Ruby was to be more on the creepier side. We wanted the more mainstream cosmetic surgery to have a certain look to give them a realistic feeling, despite being an incredible makeup effect, and it worked; many people have thought that was what those actresses actually look like.

JS: The concept and execution of the "living doll" or "Barbie" has become so commonplace. I think some people might look at them in a dehumanized way. Because of her appearance, Ruby was seen as a sexual object and that was never her intention; she wanted to be a doll. And gender neutral. Beatress, idolizing and taking after Betty Boop, is another American ideal of beauty. We wanted to translate her directly in reality so people could take a look at what that would really look like on a person. I don't know if it's jarring to people, but Tristan Risk's performance as Beatress puts people so at ease, and they become so charmed that they forget about all the work she has done and just see her for herself.

DIABOLIQUE: If so, this is





similar to the Frankenstein mythology. The fact that the monster isn't monstrous, but that it is the society in which he dwells which is horrific; malformed in its views and opinions.

Can you think of any other examples of films which have played upon this notion, and how they have affected you? David Lynch's *The Elephant Man* would be one which springs to mind as an example.

SS: *King Kong* is a pretty prime example of a misunderstood monster. My favourite monster films; the ones that have left the most marks on me would be *The Host*, *Splinter*, *Troll Hunter*, *Critters*, and *Ginger Snaps*.

JS: *Edward Scissorhands* had the biggest effect on me. There was a cardboard standee of him at our local video store and I thought he looked scary. I saw the film and absolutely learned the lesson everyone should. You can't judge someone on their appearances alone. I find most monsters in this world look as average and unassuming as can be.


DIABOLIQUE: How does Medical Horror inform the narrative of *See No Evil 2*?

SS: The familiarity that the characters who work in the morgue have about medicine and the layout of the building is crucial to whether they are going to survive the encounter. The power goes out at one point which gives the entire location a very labyrinth feel as the group tries to escape with their lives.

JS: It's important for Amy's character. It's even more important that [the others] don't have medical training by in large as it makes the stakes higher. If they get hurt, they don't have the skills to just expertly sew one another back up. It's more dangerous.

DIABOLIQUE: *See No Evil 2* is the first feature that you've directed without having also written the screenplay. Has this affected or altered the working dynamic between you in any way?

SS: We were very fortunate to have a great collaborative process with the script. I don't think we could ever make anything that doesn't reflect both our humour and



"THE FAMILIARITY THAT THE CHARACTERS WHO WORK IN THE MORGUE HAVE ABOUT MEDICINE IS CRUCIAL TO WHETHER THEY ARE GOING TO SURVIVE THE ENCOUNTER."

sensibilities. There were a lot of tweaks along the way; more exciting kills, different characters, changes in dialogue. The cast, especially Danielle Harris and Glenn 'Kane' Jacobs, had a lot of input into their characters. Meeting and having admired Danielle and her work for so many years, her character, Amy, really transformed to reflect her own personality more. She brings such a wonderful honest and ballsy quality to the role. Glenn was the only person returning from the first film and it was important to him to have the mythos of Jacob Goodnight develop.

JS: It was wonderful to have a lot of creative input into the film. Our films are so important to us. We could never be guns for hire. We wouldn't do a project unless we believed in it and had meaningful creative input, and it was no different with *See No Evil 2*. We love horror and it was one hell of an opportunity to be able to recreate Jacob Goodnight, our very own masked man horror icon. It was important for us to rectify anywhere the original had fallen short with the sequel. The film just bleeds our sensibilities, humor, and style throughout.

DIABOLIQUE: Kaare Andrews (*Cabin in Fever: Patient Zero*) spoke recently

about the pitfalls and challenges of picking up a franchise in which the last installment was released quite some time ago. Do you feel that there was a certain degree of pressure in taking on a franchise such as this, for it's been eight years since the original *See No Evil*?

SS: I think a lot of fans were hoping for the sequel to come out a bit sooner, but I don't we've lost anything from that time gap. The film picks up right where the last one left off and kicks right into high gear. As a WWE and Kane fan, I am ecstatic to see the next film and I'm pretty fucking stoked that we got to do what we did with the film. It's the kind of follow up I wanted to see. Hopefully, if/when we do the third one, we don't have to wait too long to make it. I'd like it to pick up right where this one left off. Maybe we can make seven and they are like this crazy week when this psychotic ran loose.

JS: I found it to be an exciting challenge and I mean that with absolutely no sarcasm. No film ever has to be bad. Just because the franchise had lain dormant for so long there wasn't any reason we couldn't just come along and pick up right where we left off. And that's exactly what we do. Much like *Halloween 2*, *See No Evil*

2 picks up that night right where the first film ended.

DIABOLIQUE: WWE Studios seem to be taking genre very seriously at present. Do you think it's possible that they may become one of the major players in the world of horror within the next few years?

SS: It's definitely possible. It only takes one big hit to strike it with horror fans and then you can really build on that momentum. *The Call* was excellent, *No One Lives* had some sensational gore, *Oculus* was mature and creepy; they have been making some pretty fucking sick flicks.

JS: I think they are already showing they are serious contenders in horror. They pick unique talent and I'm not just speaking for ourselves here. I'm really impressed by the directors and cast they've been going after and picking up. I also love how they are picking WWE Superstars to play unconventional and surprising roles. I could believe what happened with Brodus Clay in *No One Lives*. And they've worked with one of my favorite actors working today, Michael Eklund, five or six times now; he's phenomenal. You should check out his video audition for *The Call*. It's online and it's incredible.

DIABOLIQUE: Do you think that the potential for that success lies upon your shoulders to a degree?

SS: I love *See No Evil 2*. I would watch that film any day of the week. A lot of people who love horror made that movie and I think it shows in every frame of the film. I hope that this film is a big success, I truly hope people dig it. We have some pretty killer ideas for the rest of the franchise, I would love to get to do them.

JS: I feel people are really going to be surprised by *See No Evil 2*. It's so much fun, especially for fellow sick fucks out there. I'm not worried at all about how it'll be received. We're horror fans and we're fans of the WWE and we made this film for all the other fans out there. It's one hell of a ride.

DIABOLIQUE: What is the plan of action once *See No Evil 2* hits the streets? Will you be getting out there to push the film in the manner of which you promoted *American Mary*, or will you be getting straight back to work and letting the existing momentum which has built up surrounding your output carry the feature?

SS: *See No Evil 2* had its trailer debut at San Diego Comic Con, then a seven minute exclusive sneak peek played at Fright Fest in the UK, and on October 15th in LA, it will have its world premiere at Screampfest. Jen and I, and many of the cast, will be there to support it. It's something that we're all extremely proud of, and tend to get the word out about films like that.

JS: The film [also] hits VOD October 15th and comes out on DVD and Blu Ray on October 21st, so everyone and anyone can spend Halloween with Jacob Goodnight. We'll be around. If *See No Evil 2* is playing, we want to be there. I'd really love to return to Australia and the UK. I know we'll be back across the US promoting it. I hope to be able to travel all over to conventions and festivals promoting the film. I love connecting with the people who come out and see us and our work.

DIABOLIQUE: Has working as directors on *See No Evil 2* and *Vendetta* inadvertently sparked off any ideas for future projects that you would both like

to write and develop sometime in the future?

SS: Jen and I are constantly developing scripts, so there have been a few created between those two films. There are also some killer projects coming up that have been penned by some unbelievably talented writers, including *Painkiller Jane*, whose script comes from co-creator Jimmy Palmiotti and Craig Weeden.

JS: We'll also be working on some graphic novels we're really excited about as they're one of the things that we take so much inspiration from for our work. We're still working on getting *Bob* to the right home. Our original monster movie. That one's very special to us.

DIABOLIQUE: If you were to be known for one thing, if your legacy was to contribute one major element to the world of genre, what would you want that thing to be, and how close do you think you are to achieving it?

SS: If I could only be attributed to one thing I would like it to be that we made great films that people enjoyed watching and still enjoy watching in the future. That would be pretty rad.

JS: I'd like our names to be among the ones that are listed when people talk about directors that changed the business. The ones that were iconic and made other people want to pick up a camera and make their own films. I want our names to be synonymous with horror. I don't know how far off we are from that. I hope we're getting close.

You can keep up to date with the Soska's exploits at their official site www.twistedtwinsproductions.net and by following their Twitter handle, @twisted_twins. With *Vendetta* scheduled for a 2015 release and an untitled third project for WWE Films in the works, it looks like these two won't be taking it easy for quite some time to come.





By ALEXANDRA WEST

the abominable

Dr. Phibes

BRAIN CRUSHING VIA elaborate head contraption, murderer using pre-coded methods for dispatching victims and darkly humorous hero/villain encounters all seem like fairly standard genre tropes these days. From the high-concept set pieces of the *Saw* series to John Doe murdering selected targets using the seven deadly sins in *Se7en* to almost any horror movie of the 1980s which kept its tongue firmly in its cheek; these tropes have been around for several decades all occupying their own firm grasp in their respective sub-genre. While they may seem like disparate elements all three were shown to co-exist in Robert Fuest's 1971 cult classic, *The Abominable Dr. Phibes*.

Starring Vincent Price in one of his most beloved roles, *The Abominable Dr. Phibes* helped solidify his niche as a tragic villain. Price had already established himself as a monumental figure in horror and *The Abominable Dr. Phibes* proved to be the perfect marriage of camp, violence, style, and humor. Set in London in the 1920s, several prominent doctors kick off the film's proceedings by dying at the hands of unusual things (bees, bats, unicorn statues). Inspector Trout (Peter Jeffrey) is on the case and puts together that all the doctors being murdered worked with Dr. Vesalius (Joseph Cotten) who tried and failed to save Dr. Phibes' wife after a car crash that took her life and supposedly Dr. Phibes' as well. Trout and Vesalius, however, believe that Phibes is still at large and

behind the murders. As they begin to track Phibes, they fall deeper into his trap and realize that, in order to dispatch his victims, he is using the Plagues of Egypt as written about in The Bible. Price would go on to keep the role alive in the sequel, *Dr. Phibes Rises Again*, and play a similar role in 1973's *Theatre of Blood* but swapping professions from a doctor of theology and music to a Shakespearian actor.

The role of the doctor is an omnipresent theme in the film. While Dr. Phibes' is not a medical doctor though, he is a doctor of the arts and of religion and both disciplines fuel the methods to his madness. While the car crash did not kill Phibes, it mangled his vocal cords and his voice (Price's iconic melodic voice) comes out in a staccato adding to the strangeness of the film. Phibes overcomes this by projecting the quality of his voice using a gramophone factor, which helps define the absurdity of the film and adds to the heightened quality of Phibes' villainy, putting him in stark contrast with the stiff-upper-lip-ness of Scotland Yard. Phibes repairs his face by making a mask which allows him to appear as he once was. Towards the climax of the film, his true visage is revealed paying homage to one of the most iconic reveals in horror, *The Phantom of the Opera*.

Phibes' anger that drives the plot of the film has to do with the failure of the medical doctor. While tragedy and loss are common themes within film, the nature of revenge on a doctor with perceived God-like powers was quite a leap in the 1970s (something else that would be mirrored in *Saw*). Medical

horror has been a leading horror sub-genre since Mary Shelley published *Frankenstein* in 1818. While most medical horrors deal with the creation of an abomination, Dr. Phibes deals in retribution against the promises of the medical field which was advancing at a rapid pace in the 20th century.

There have been constant rumblings of remaking *The Abominable Dr. Phibes*, most recently in 2013 with Tim Burton, a lifelong Vincent Price fan, at the helm with Johnny Depp in the title role. As with any remake these days, the announcement was met with a resounding, "Why?" While the project seems to have been shelved for the time being, with Burton and Depp working on several other projects, it's particularly hard to imagine anyone remaking Fuest's film without a complete reinvention. Fuest combined a macabre plot with wicked humour; it's not the bleak work that David Fincher or James Wan's characters exist in it. Its wild art deco style is more reminiscent of Dario Argento's visual style but with more, you know, plot.

For a film based around the tragedies that can befall the temporal body, *The Abominable Dr. Phibes* is delightfully campy with earned moments of horror, suspense and pathos. It is a film that has been borrowed from, but thus far never truly duplicated.



MOVIES THAT SHOOK THE PUBLIC AND CHANGED GENRE CINEMA

MET TO THE N



THOOD MADNESS

By Jake Whirtnier

Echoing a storied tradition of Mad Scientist archetypes, Stuart Gordon's *Re-Animator* injects real and fictional medical (mal)practice into his slice of Lovecraftian cinema.

IT'S EASY TO throw out words like campy and absurd when discussing a film as unapologetically self-aware as *Re-Animator* (1985), but what its light-hearted and parodic surface conceals is a cache of serious issues that have long been debated in medical scientific communities. Even if Stuart Gordon and his crew only had in mind that the film would be a fun adaptation of what is often cited as H.P. Lovecraft's worst work, a parody of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus*, what lurks below is a fascinating discourse. Some of this is inherited from the film's *Frankenstein* heritage, but other aspects reflect both H.P. Lovecraft's worldview, especially his attitude towards science, as well as revolutionary advances in medical science in the 1970s and early 1980s leading up to *Re-Animator*'s release.

First we must begin by exploring the real life precedents and parallels of *Re-Animator*'s medical world and its tit-

ular "mad scientist." This endeavor will necessarily examine some of *Frankenstein*'s real-world inspirations, since *Re-Animator* is indebted to them as well. A look at these eccentric experimenters will undoubtedly provoke ethical debates, as well as elicit some curiosity about the research and practices of today and whether or not we are really so far from Herbert West's methods. Following this explanation of these real-world inspirations we will dive into an analysis of *Re-Animator* itself, with a focus on the film's portrayal of scientific experimentation, what's real and what's not in its medical world, the characters, and to some extent, formal elements of the film. After this analysis, we will return to the medical advances that were most frequently discussed and criticized in the years preceding the film's release, as well as some contemporary methods that someone with West's goals would likely approve of. As we get closer to the dream of beating death, a dream shared by West, Dr. Hill, and the

non-fictional scientists I will mention, some questions will arise concerning the lengths to which we will go in order to reverse natural decay, freak accidents, disease, and other commonplace causes of death.

When it comes to medical science, how far are we willing to go? This is perhaps one of the most interesting questions that *Re-Animator* elicits.

The Frankenstein Heritage and Real-Life Mad Science

SINCE H.P. LOVECRAFT'S *Herbert West-Reanimator* is a parody of Shelley's *Frankenstein* it is beneficial to briefly describe some of her story's monumental legacy. *Frankenstein* can be seen as the merging of the mythical pursuit of the elixir of life and developments of modern science. Victor Frankenstein's

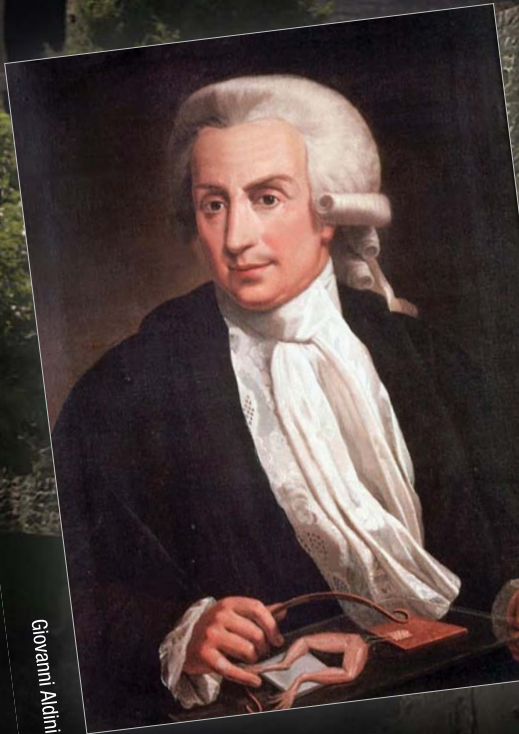
“HERBERT WEST’S HYPOTHESIS DIFFERS FROM THAT OF GIOVANNI ALDINI OR VICTOR FRANKENSTEIN, BECAUSE HE VIEWS LIFE AS A CHEMICAL PROCESS AND ARGUES THAT ALTERING THAT CHEMICAL PROCESS DIRECTLY CAN YIELD RESULTS SUCH AS THE PREVENTION OF DEATH.”

which American society responds to the rapid pace of discoveries in biology and medicine, discoveries that challenge traditional understandings of what it means to be human.” Indeed, Shelley’s original story contains a similar message; however, as scientific advances increased in frequency, such a reactionary critique became more prevalent.

When *Frankenstein* was first published in 1818, Shelley and the greater public were well aware of interesting experiments performed by scientists, pseudo-scientists, and showmen in public forums. The science of electricity was a major focus and source of astonishment. The innovations of Luigi Gal-

vini and the antics of his nephew Giovanni Aldini have been frequently discussed with regard to possible inspirations for *Frankenstein’s* paradigmatic creation myth. In Lederer’s book she quotes Shelley as saying: “perhaps a corpse would be re-animated; galvanism had given token of such things; perhaps the component parts of a creature might be manufactured, brought together, and endued with vital warmth.” This was during the early 19th century when the boundary between life and death was being explored exhaustively.

Giovanni Aldini was a 19th century Italian physicist who spent much of his life testing the application of his uncle’s discoveries. Aldini traveled all over Europe publicly electrifying dead animal bodies. Localized electric charges would produce spasmodic movements in the



Giovanni Aldini

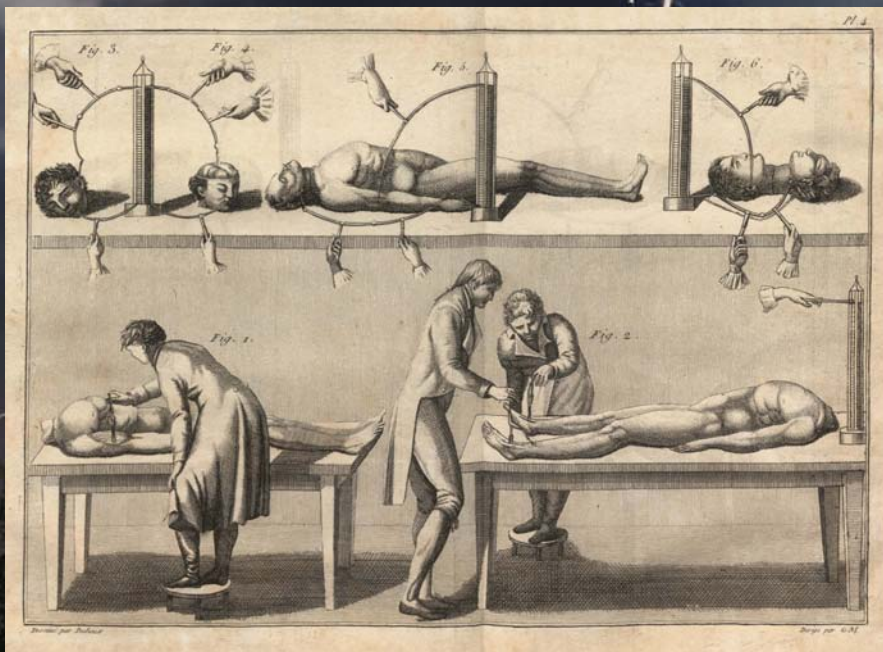


Mary Shelley

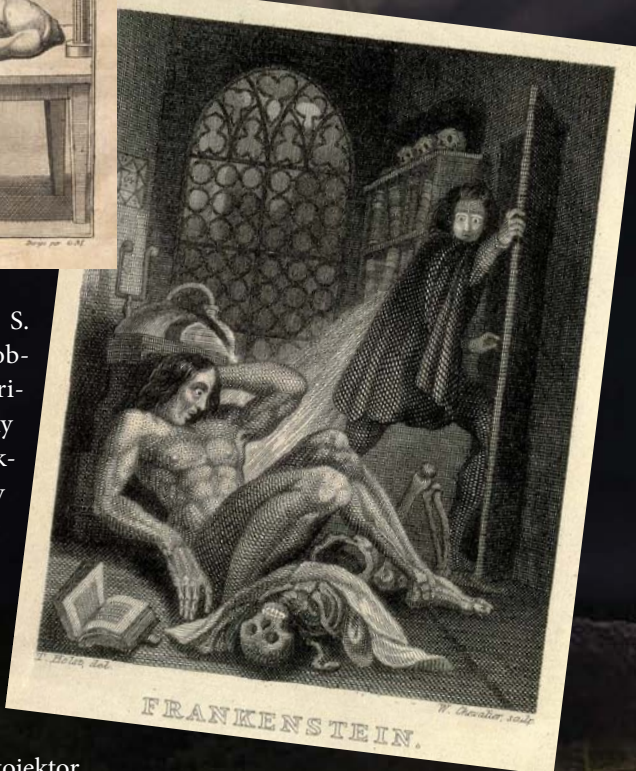


Dr. Sergei S. Bryukhonenko

search for a way to conquer death and decay leads to unwanted consequences. Once this story hit Hollywood it became, as Susan Lederer states in her book *Frankenstein: Penetrating the Secrets of Nature*, “[...] a moral lesson illustrating the punishment for ambitious scientists who seek to usurp the place of God by creating life. More than a moral lesson, the celluloid *Frankenstein* story is a powerful metaphor for addressing the ways in



transplant the head of one monkey onto the body of another. The franken-monkey actually survived, but since White had no way of repairing the nerve damage resulting from severing the spinal cord, the monkey ended up paralyzed. Despite the grotesque nature of his experiments, White's discovery of a spinal cord cooling process is still used by many medical institutions today.



limbs and facial muscles of these bodies, which often gave the appearance of re-animation. Aldini was extremely eccentric but he would become one of the first to treat mentally ill patients with shocks to the brain (electrotherapy), a technique that we still use today. Aldini's basic assumption was that electricity was the life force sending communicatory signals from the brain to muscles and back.

Aldini's most famous demonstration took place at the Royal College of Surgeons in London using the corpse of a recently executed prisoner. In his article "Giovanni Aldini: From Animal Electricity to Human Brain Stimulation," André Parent says of this demonstration: "The results were dramatic: when the rods were applied to Foster's mouth and ear, Aldini mentioned that 'the jaw began to quiver, the adjoining muscles were horribly contorted, and the left eye actually opened.' When one rod was moved to touch the rectum, the whole body convulsed: indeed, the movements were 'so much increased as almost to give an appearance of reanimation.'" Readers will most likely be reminded of the pivotal scene in *Frankenstein* (whether the story, or the many media adaptations since) when the monster is awakened after being stimulated by an electrical shock.

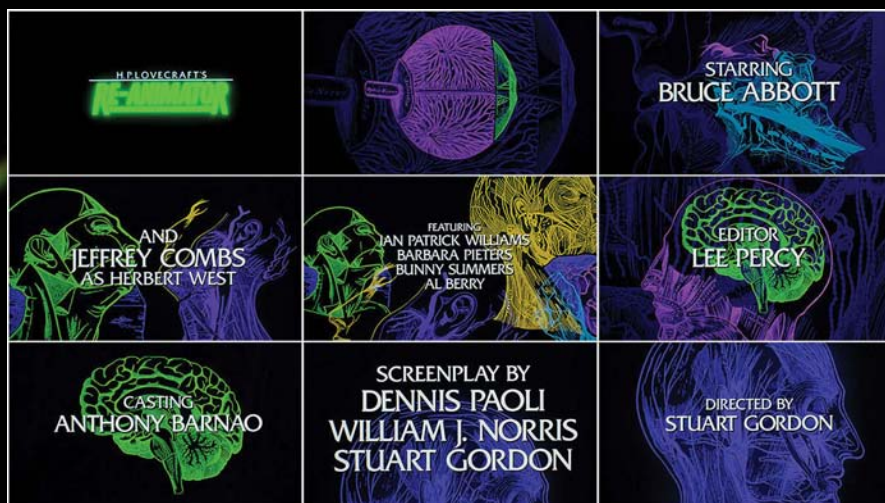
Two more paragons of real-life

mad science are Dr. Sergei S. Bryukhonenko and Dr. Robert J. White, whose experiments would fit right into any B-movie. Dr. Sergei S. Bryukhonenko is now colloquially known as the inventor of the zombie dog because of his participation in the 1940 film *Experiments in the Revival of Organisms* which demonstrates Dr. Bryukhonenko's "autojektor." According to author Frank Swain, the autojektor was an early life-support system that drew blood from the head of a deceased, a decapitated animal, and deposited it in a glass chamber where it was oxygenated and kept warm before being pumped back into the animal. The validity of the film itself has been questioned, but Swain indicates that Dr. Bryukhonenko was able to keep dogs alive using this method for up to 100 minutes before the blood supply coagulated causing the system to fail.

Dr. White was a surgeon who specialized in the field of transplantology and performed experiments similar to those of Dr. Bryukhonenko. White became the first person to successfully remove the brain of a dog and keep it alive outside of its body. Even cooler is that in the 1970s, White was able to successfully

Re-Animator

STUART GORDON is one of the founders of Chicago's Organic Theater and directed some 40 plays there before turning to filmmaking. In an interview as part of a 1987 *Film Comment* article about him by Meredith Brody, Gordon said that the beginning of *Re-Animator* occurred during a conversation about vampire films when he expressed to some friends that he was fed up with *Dracula* adaptations and that it would be fun if somebody did *Frankenstein*. One of his friends suggested he read H.P. Lovecraft's *Herbert West-Reanimator*, and the birth of a cult classic was set into motion.



accompanied by haunting tones on the soundtrack, as a doctor and two security guards are ushered by a nurse to an office from which cries of help are emanating. After barging inside, this group is confronted with the horrific sight of a young student's experiment gone wrong, a seeming scene of murder. The young student, who is later identified as Herbert West (Jeffrey Combs), proclaims in protest to accusations of murder that he actually brought the horrific creature, formerly known as Dr. Gruber (Al Berry), back to life.

Next, the title sequence designed by Robert Dawson and accompanied by an appropriation of the theme from *Psycho*, bombards viewers with blueprints of the human anatomy including eyes, muscles, and the brain. The main title sequence here draws viewers deeper into the medi-

A key factor of Lovecraft's story, besides the aforementioned *Frankenstein* legacy, is that it is informed by Lovecraft's personal belief of an infinite, in-different cosmos. This strictly rational view of the universe lines up well with

West's character including new scientific advancements and public reactions and sentiments in response to them.

Now that we have some context we can jump into some of the sequences that best demonstrate the way the film plays

“IF WEST’S RE-AGENT EXISTED AND COULD SUCCESSFULLY PROMOTE HEALTHY BLOOD-FLOW, SUCH A METHOD WOULD THEORETICALLY WORK.”



the typical depiction of the scientific pursuit of knowledge. It is even more closely aligned with the idea of trying to conquer death without consideration for incurring the wrath of some kind of greater being. Herbert West, with his belief that the soul is a myth and that life is essentially just a physical and chemical process that can be manipulated if one finds the correct formula, can be seen in one sense as springing from Lovecraft's worldview. When Gordon adapted the story along with writers William J. Norris and Dennis Paoli, new traits were incorporated into

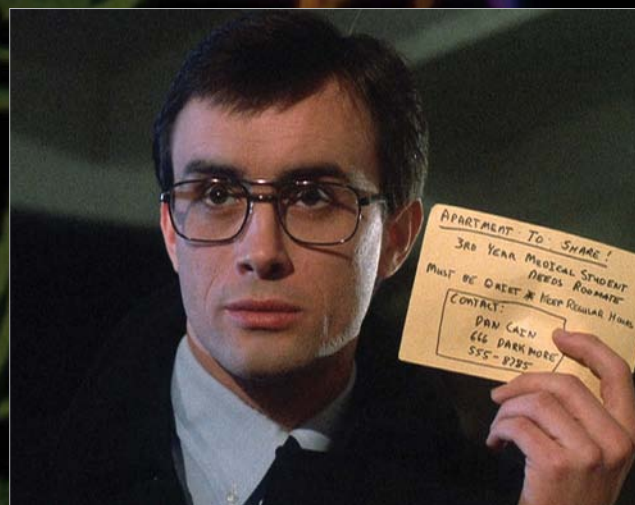
with the tropes of Medical Horror and in particular the way medical science is portrayed through setting and formal elements, as well as the narrative structure of *Re-Animator*, and the way the film's mad scientists echo some of the examples mentioned earlier. We will also take into consideration aspects of plausibility within the created world of the film.

It is in a sense a look at the real and the fictional in the world of *Re-Animator*.

Re-Animator is a film that comes out of the gate at full speed. The opening sequence and titles of the film quickly establish its tempo and overall mood. An establishing shot of the University of Zurich's medical institute is

cal world of *Re-Animator*, demonstrating through the visuals that this is the realm of science and exploration, and providing viewers with a schemata through which they can situate the rest of the action.

The sequence immediately following the opening titles introduces us to Dan Cain (Bruce Abbott) a young medical student at Miskatonic Medical School.



This is one of the most overt sequences as far as ethical commentary about the limits of medical science is concerned. Dan is shown administering CPR to a patient whose heartbeat has stopped. Another doctor tries to use defibrillation but that does not work either. Cain intervenes once more, trying his best to resuscitate the woman using CPR, but he fails. The senior doctor reprimands Cain for being too optimistic and stubborn, telling him “A good doctor knows when to stop.” Her quote here is in line with the Hippocratic tradition according to which knowing the limits of medicine is a key aspect of the physician’s knowledge, appreciation of the art of medicine, and recognition of the power of nature. This idea is an obvious concern for a film that is about the re-animation of the dead. At the level of characterization both West and Cain have been efficiently established as medical students who don’t know when to give up.

Shortly after the introduction of Cain, we learn that Herbert West has come to Miskatonic to finish medical school. This reveal is followed by a confrontation between West and Dr. Hill (David Gale) who is, according to Dean Halsey (Robert Sampson), one of the leading doctors at Miskatonic. West is immediately hostile towards Dr. Hill, criticizing in particular a theory he has about a six to 12 minute limit on the life of the brain stem after death. This is the first instance during which the science of *Re-Animator* is explicitly stated. West argues that Hill’s theory is outdated and too restrictive. West’s desire to break Dr. Hill’s arbitrary 6-12 minute limit for brain death is in line with recent studies demonstrating that functional normality can be restored after clinical death lasting longer than twelve minutes. Of course because neurons rely on oxygenated blood flow to survive, irreversible brain damage will typically occur even after only a few minutes; however, this is actually something that West acknowledges.

West’s argument is founded upon his own theory of life. He says: “If one could find extremely fresh specimens and re-charge that chemical process,



bang we’d have re-animation.” West’s hypothesis differs from that of someone like Aldini, or Victor Frankenstein, because he views life as a chemical process and argues that altering that chemical process directly can yield results such as the prevention of death. This stands in contrast to the electrically based theories of Aldini, Frankenstein, and some of the other mad scientists of the past. Such an understanding is mostly in line with contemporary knowledge of how tasks executed by our brain rely on

chemical signals called neurotransmitters. Of course not all of the science in *Re-Animator* is fully explained; we never are told, for instance, what is in West’s re-agent, but his theoretical framework is situated within a somewhat plausible framework.

Cain and West’s morgue break-in is a particularly interesting sequence. Under the guise of bringing in a dead body, Cain rolls West into the dark chamber. Meanwhile, the soundtrack helps to build tension as West searches for an “ideal specimen” to test his re-agent on. This



situation clearly mirrors that of West’s real-life counterparts who often mined morgues and cemeteries for their test-subjects. The music changes as they enter the inner-chamber where the bodies are stored and the lack of light emphasizes the furtive nature of this experi-



“THE EXTENT TO WHICH DEAN HALSEY HAS BRAIN DAMAGE IS POTENTIALLY EXAGGERATED, SINCE HIS NEURONS WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN LACKING OXYGEN FOR VERY LONG.”



ment. West finds an “almost perfect” body, who has been dead for only a few hours. He also explains to Cain and the spectator that any evidence of re-animated consciousness will be considered a success. He injects the re-agent directly into the corpse’s brainstem and he and Cain wait. The brainstem, in case readers are not aware, is the region of the brain connecting the cerebrum and the spinal

cord. It relays information from the body to the cerebrum and cerebellum and vice versa. The brainstem is also critically involved in respiration, cardiovascular control, and consciousness. The idea here, then, is that West’s re-agent has the ability to chemically stimu-

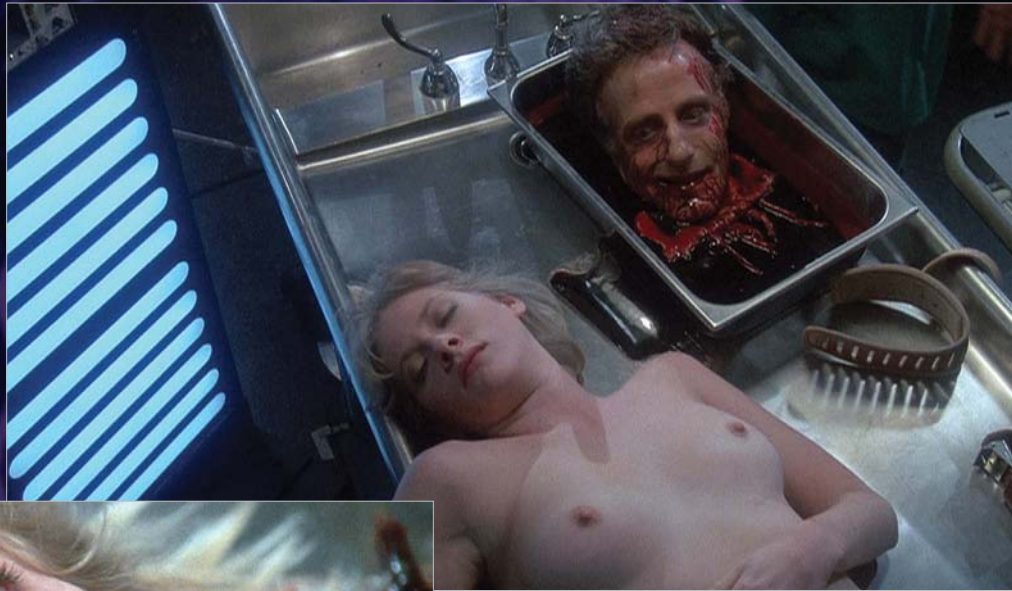
late the brainstem and jump-start these aforementioned functions. The interesting thing is that if West’s re-agent existed and could successfully promote healthy blood-flow such a method would theoretically work. Of course, after a few hours of clinical death, the damage to the person’s brain and cells would be irreversible. Still, if one thought of West using this method on an even fresher body, such as those to come, its effectiveness would be more plausible.

At first nothing happens, but after increasing the dosage, West’s second re-animated human springs to life, in markedly better condition than Dr. Gruber. This monster is angry and violent however, which leads to the brutal murder of Dean Halsey in a shocking and fun sequence. West has no choice but to kill his creation and does so viciously and without much remorse. Clearly West is not the type to get emotionally attached to his creations. John Naulin, who worked on the special makeup effects for *Re-Animator*, does an amazing job here creating the magnificently gory shot of West pushing a bone saw through the re-animated man’s chest. West realizes that Dean Halsey is his only chance at a fresh body without killing one himself. This time he is able to re-animate his subject with moderately violent side effects. In this case, since Dean Halsey was only dead for a few minutes it is actually quite reasonable to assume



that a method whereby one could begin his blood-circulation again would be able to restore him from his brief clinical death, provided the trauma to his brain and body was not too egregious. Here the extent to which Dean Halsey has brain damage is potentially exaggerated, since his neurons would not have been lacking oxygen for very long.

A key transitional moment in the film occurs when Dr. Hill confronts West at his house about Dean Halsey's condition. Here we see Dr. Hill revealed as the truly mad of the two as he blackmails



Re-Animator's climactic final scenes are pure spectacle. At this point the film has completely forgotten any sense of vague plausibility and takes full advantage of this by incorporating horror-classics such as laser lobotomies and mind control. The final sequence can also be seen as the culmination of Lovecraft's *Frankenstein* parody. One might also suppose that Gordon's own interest in over-the-top spectacle may have played some role in it.

West into giving up his discovery. While West has trouble with restraint, his intentions, in as far as viewers can discern them, seem mostly to be for what one could see as a greater good. That is, he pursues scientific knowledge and his personal experiments with the hopes that he can defeat death for the sake of humanity. Of course there is a touch of selfishness here when one considers the possibility that West might just want to live forever and will not necessarily be willing to share this with others. Still, he is comparatively more morally redeemable than the Dr. Hill who emerges for the rest of the film as a selfish physician who continuously strives for greater fame and power. While West and Hill are both ruthless then, at least the former has somewhat excusable intentions. The viewer's moral allegiance moves towards West as Dr. Hill appears as the truly evil character. The mise-en-scène aids in establishing Dr. Hill as an

imposing figure towering over West in the frame. This scene demonstrates Dr. Hill's power of manipulation as he tries to convince West to do what he wants. West shrinks back in response to Dr. Hill's forceful command, but he refuses to stand for such coercion for long. When West realizes that he is in danger of losing everything he decides to kill Dr. Hill.

With the decapitation of Dr. Hill, *Re-Animator's* transition towards pure camp-horror begins. West props up the head and decides to test whether his reagent can work on individual parts. This is reminiscent of Dr. Bryukhonenko's experiments with detached dog heads. Of course, the fact that West is able to completely re-animate Dr. Hill's head and body separately is ludicrous, although the special effects are phenomenal. Even more absurd is that Dr. Hill is able to control his detached body to knockout West and escape with his research.

Medical Science Then and Now

THERE ARE A few scientific advancements from just before the film was made that may be interesting to consider as having shaped some of the medical discourse and modes of portrayal that we have seen through this analysis of *Re-Animator*. These would be Jean B. Rosenbaum's invention of the cardiac pacemaker in 1951, the beginning of in-vitro fertilization (test-tube babies), and advances in gene therapy. All three of these innovations were within the public discourse in the years leading up to the production of *Re-Animator*, so it would not be surprising if public reactions and ethical considerations would have influenced the filmmakers during their research into medical science for the film.



similar to those that *Re-Animator* pokes fun at through its exaggeration of the consequences of scientific experimentation.

Recent efforts to realize the goals of Herbert West and the other mad scientists we have discussed are awe-inspiring. It is interesting to look at the methods scientists today believe can help us delay or reverse clinical death, how they are different than those employed in *Re-Animator*, and the limitations that we still face. It would appear that re-animation per se is still outside of our reach. As David Lamb says in his article, "Reversibility and Death: A Reply to David J. Cole":

"While loss of heartbeat

The case of Jean B. Rosenbaum and his pacemaker is reminiscent of mad scientist tropes, but in this case he was simply a brilliant man who would go on to save millions. In his book *Screams of Reason: Mad Science and Modern Culture* David J. Skal quotes Rosenbaum discussing the origins of his invention: "I despaired at the loss of life in such a young person [a woman whose death of heart disease he witnessed during medical school] and was irritated at the useless procedures applied in the effort to restore her heartbeat. After brooding over her death for several weeks I decided to take an active approach—to consider the possibility of more effect ways to reactivate the stilled heart"

Thus, that unwavering desire to succeed in ways that science theretofore had not, to defeat, in some sense, "the forces of nature," to save a life threatened by death, these ambitions are the same that we have seen in characters like Herbert West and Dan Cain, as well as the real-life figures discussed earlier in this article. Many have explained such considerations as telltale traits of a popular culture "mad scientist"; however, as the Rosenbaum case illustrates, they are also the traits of a legendary doctor, of a scientist striving to surpass previously conceived limitations. This ambition is both something to fear when it overcomes someone to the point of destructive consequences, but

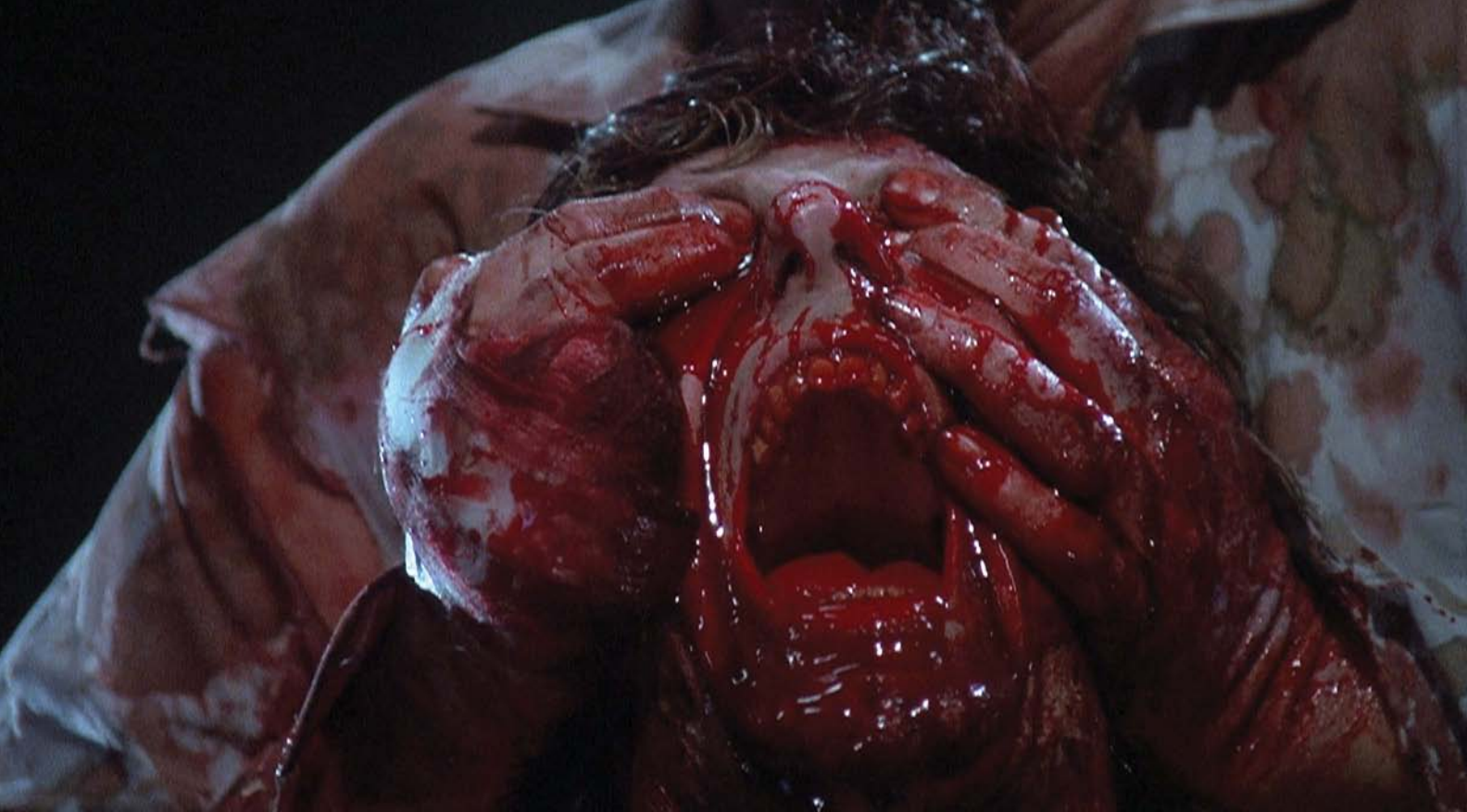
also something to admire when it leads to inventions as pivotal as the world's first pacemaker.

As Jon Turney reminds us in his book, *Frankenstein's Footsteps: Science, Genetics and Popular Culture*, a type of biological revolution emerged in the public sphere as a result of the birth of the first "test-tube" baby in 1978 and the debate over recombinant DNA research around the same time. As the process of im-

plementing and growing to term a human egg fertilized in the laboratory shifted from a futuristic possibility to reality, many questioned the ethical consequences of such conception. The idea that scientists could manufacture babies in their laboratories certainly became a topic of discussion, often accompanied by unease regarding the future of scientific endeavors. Many questioned whether scientists would know where to draw the line and whether their current experiments would have unwanted consequences. Similarly, efforts towards re-writing, and generally manipulating, the genetic code appeared to many as the beginning of a real-life horror film. Such reactions are



can be restored or even replaced by a transplant organ or artifact, dead neurons cannot regenerate and a dead brainstem cannot be replaced or its functions restored." Still there is some positive progress being made. For example, it has been demonstrated that the prevailing concept of inevitable, irreversible damage in the brain following reperfusion [the restoration of blood flow to an organ or tissue] after clinical death of more than five minutes is not quite accurate. The limit for reversal to good functional survival of heart and brain is now thought to be between 10 and 20 minutes according to Dr. Peter Safar in



his research into resuscitation from clinical death. This would support Herbert West's critique of Dr. Hill's theory. However, after 20 minutes, and perhaps even before that in many cases, brain damage is a possibility. To be fair, West does acknowledge that brain damage is in situations where subjects are dead for too long. So in general, it would seem as though limitless re-animation is still the stuff of horror and science-fiction.

A more promising method for battling death has emerged and is commonly referred to as suspended animation. Suspended animation can be either temperature or chemically induced. The prevailing technique of suspended animation was actually developed by Dr. Safar and Dr. Sam Tisherman and is called emergency preservation and resuscitation (EPR). It is a method of temperature-induced suspended animation wherein doctors lower the patient's body temperature to about 50°F (10°C) by injecting a large volume of a cold saline solution into the aorta (which is the largest artery in the body). The idea is that this therapeutic hypothermia will reduce the risk of injury from lack of blood flow and buy doctors time to perform surgery on damaged ar-

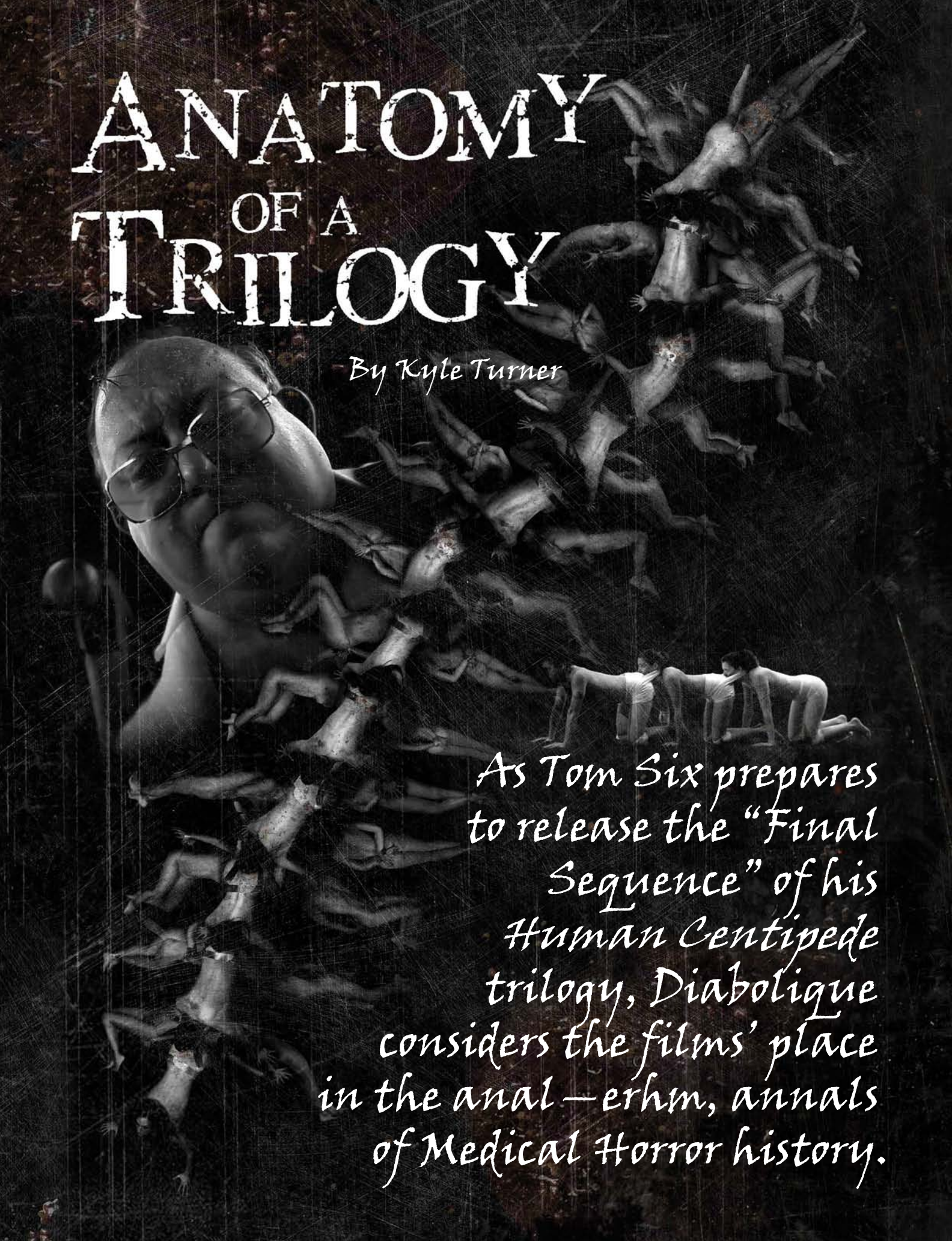
teries. As Peter Rhee, one of the other doctors who helped develop the technique has said: "If a patient comes to us two hours after dying, you can't bring them back to life. But if they're dying and you suspend them, you have a chance to bring them back after their structural problems have been fixed." In May 2014, researchers at the UPMC Presbyterian Hospital in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania began the first human clinical trials using this method. It will be interesting to see whether or not EPR will edge us closer to the dream of conquering death.

Re-Animator is more than a fun, campy horror film. It is certainly both of those things, but it also speaks to larger concerns and should be seen in conversation with real-life science and scientific precedents. Acknowledging this connection may help reveal what lies beneath the film's stylish and gory façade. While it is pleasurable to view *Re-Animator* simply in terms of its gross-out factor, its still-impressive practical effects and makeup, and its thrilling climax, it is also worthwhile to be aware of its scientific discourses. After all, a major question that the film prompts is: how far are we willing to go to prevent or reverse death?

Indeed this is the question that early "mad-scientists" such as Aldini, White, and Bryukhonenko, as well as more recent scientists such as Rosenbaum, and Safar have all elicited. The fact that Herbert West and Dan Cain are both unable to contain themselves when given the chance to reverse clinical death should speak to the power of the hope of conquering death. In channeling this sentiment, Gordon and his crew successfully establish the world of *Re-Animator* within that of a greater debate about scientific advancement and the limits of human knowledge. One might argue that part of the lasting appeal of the film is its scientific underpinnings that are in conversation with our society, which is, at least partially, dependent upon science for aiding or curing us. Our readiness for quick solutions can often result in blindness to the necessary cautions and the limitations of science.



ANATOMY OF A TRILOGY



By Kyle Turner

As Tom Six prepares to release the "Final Sequence" of his Human Centipede trilogy, Diabolique considers the films' place in the anal—erhm, annals of Medical Horror history.

AT THE CENTER of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is the question: "Who is the monster: the creator or the created?" It's this oscillating ambiguity that gives the novel its emotional thrust, especially as its titular scientist's created Monster reveals its depth and complexity. ("I ought to be thy Adam," The Monster says, "but I am rather the fallen angel..."). In Tom Six's *The Human Centipede (First Sequence)* and *The Human Centipede II (Full Sequence)* (henceforth referred to as *The Human Centipede* and *The Human Centipede II*), no such complexity exists—nor does it need to. Our crazed Doctor Frankenstein—or in this case, Dr. Josef Heiter (Dieter Laser)—though entirely psychopathic, *knows* he's the fallen angel.

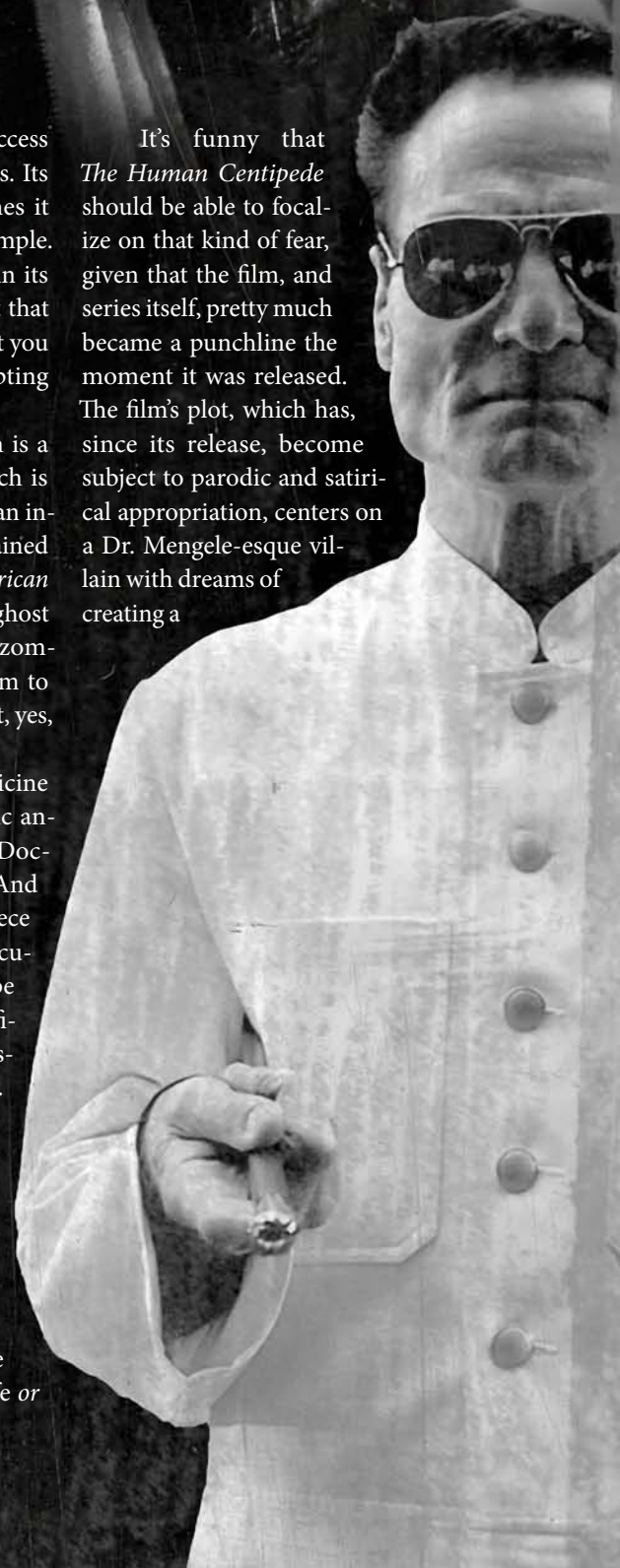
It is difficult to pin down exactly what *The Human Centipede* is, or even what it wants to be. This may seem obvious, with every element (especially its

acting) played up, yet part of its success is its ability to straddle certain lines. Its release by IFC Midnight establishes it as a midnight movie, plain and simple. *The Human Centipede* takes pride in its vulgarity. There's a sick humor to it that John Waters probably loves and that you could imagine Lars von Trier adapting in the future.

But medical experimentation is a particular subgenre of horror which is harder to garner laughs for. There's an inherent absurdity to the trope, contained in everything from *Nurse 3D* to *American Mary*. Unlike your run of the mill ghost stories, masked murderers, and zombies, however, there's an odd realism to Medical Horror—the possibility that, yes, maybe it *could* happen.

We understand modern medicine to be an all-encompassing scientific angel, both tangible and intangible. Doctors and nurses exist as our saviors. And when their job is subverted in a piece of horror, it makes us doubt the security that was originally supposed to be there, to provide us safety and confidence for the future. It's a manifestation of our fears about mortality. For, as aforementioned, those in the medical field represent the power of life, the wondrousness of it. They are caretaker *and* life giver. But they can just as easily bring death upon us; Dr. Kavorkian wasn't a fictional character, and though his rationale may, to some degree, make sense, the power he has to bring life *or* death is chilling all the same.

It's funny that *The Human Centipede* should be able to focalize on that kind of fear, given that the film, and series itself, pretty much became a punchline the moment it was released. The film's plot, which has, since its release, become subject to parodic and satirical appropriation, centers on a Dr. Mengele-esque villain with dreams of creating a



human centipede, in which he will sew three people together from ass to mouth to create one intestinal system. And, following the traditional horror tropes with a sly wink, his prey are two girls stranded on the side of the road near his house who ask to use his telephone. He obliges, smiling, with a glint in his eye.

Is there a line in *The Human Centipede* between 'scary' and 'disgusting,' and are they mutually exclusive? To answer the latter question, yes and no. Tom Six wouldn't be confused with art house provocateurs like Michael Haneke or von Trier, yet that provocation is nonetheless central to this work. The ideology behind the films is murkier in the first than in the second, but it nonetheless feels confrontational. Consider two scenes which are, in essence, the same, but play out rather differently. In the first entry, Katsuro (Akihiro Kitamura) is the front of the centipede, with Lindsay (Ashley C. Williams) in the middle. When Katsuro has to defecate, Lindsay is forced to swallow his excrement. In the way Six switches back and forth between reactions shots between Katsuro and Lindsay, and the slyly grinning good doctor, it's rather horrifying. Yes, it's 'disgusting,' but because it's seen as this relatively isolated event with these few characters stuck to one another, Katsuro profusely apologizing, that terror comes off as nearly nuanced. The scene is replicated in the second film, with Martin injecting a laxative into every



"Medicine is often connoted with precision and perfection, a very optimistic 'nothing can go wrong' attitude in a field exponentially expanding. It's that fear we dust under the rug in favor of optimism which makes such stories so horrific: putting our lives in another person's hands."





member of his larger human centipede. And when the consequences begin to occur, the scene is played more for weird, perverse laughs than actual scares. *The Human Centipede 2* wants to capitalize on the dark humor of the first and notch it up to 11, almost obscuring what made it scary in the first place. It's a winking nudge, a poke in the rib of an audience member, pointing and saying, "Isn't this gross?" It's the difference between getting at the fear of the audience's own anxiety about filth and then mocking it.

There's some struggle between artist and art in these stories, a pervasive exploration of loss of control. Medicine is often connoted with precision and perfection, a very optimistic 'nothing can go wrong' attitude in a field that is exponentially expanding. It's that fear we dust under the rug in favor of optimism which makes such stories so horrific: putting our lives in another person's hands. But unlike several protagonists within the genre, Dr. Heiter is never seen to be benign in the film. He's so bent on creating something singularly *his* that it blinds him entirely to a little thing called ethics.

Even if Dr. Heiter wasn't so 'blinded,' he'd carry. That's the point. By being a mashup of those monsters, his caricatured nature (which might be misread as poor overacting) demonstrates an impulse to self-reflexively outdo his forbear-

ers. Heiter is combining body parts like Dr. Frankenstein and he's manipulating and mutilating their bodies, like Mengele.

Laser's face looks as if someone carved it in stone and then rubber was stretched over it. It's harsh and unfriendly, jagged and dangerous. From certain angles, it looks as if the doctor *himself* has undergone plastic surgery. Not the same as creating a human centipede, no, but it adds a strange layer of texture to the character. Dr. Heiter becomes the kind of man that would not only endorse that kind of surgery, he would endorse any kind. It's here where his professionalism is called into question: he may just like the modification of bodies.

To some degree, this could be read as an interesting examination of the taboo of body modification versus the fetishization of it. *American Mary* treads the same ground with more specificity, but while this modification is torture for everyone else, there's a sycophantic, possibly ideological high that Dr. Heiter gets when he experiments. Arguably, the purpose of body modification is to bring oneself closer with their own body; Dr. Heiter wants to bring himself closer to *bodies*, having total control over them. Like all great maniacs, he wants to be God.

The euphoria Dr. Heiter feels when exerting this deistic control over bodies is evident throughout the film, but seems





“Laser’s face [looks] as if someone carved it in stone and then rubber was stretched over it. It’s harsh and unfriendly, jagged and dangerous. From certain angles, it looks as if the doctor himself has undergone plastic surgery.”

to be especially present during his lecture. As he goes through the slideshow, detailing the processes of his desired creation, Laser’s voice is tempered. It is controlled in only the way a madman can control it. Rather than base his performance off someone like Colin Clive, manic and insane, he must transcend that kind of emotive reaction altogether. He’s kind of like an Old Testament God.

The Human Centipede started as a strange joke about punishing a child molester (“I saw a child molester on television and I said, ‘They should stitch this guy with his mouth to the ass of a very fat truck driver,’” he told *Entertainment Weekly*), and then Tom Six decided to take the concept from the joke and make it a film. There are elements of Miike, and Pasolini’s Italian masterpiece *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*. But it’s easiest to see the connection between this

film and Cronenberg, even if *The Human Centipede* is like a Cronenberg from the perspective of someone watching these things occur and not experiencing it themselves. The film makes for a curious entry in Medical Horror, because the character is (purposely) drawn so thinly

that it becomes a sideshow attraction, not unlike Todd Browning’s *Freaks*. So while the film bears Cronenbergian elements of body horror—having the fear and trying to gain control of one’s body—there’s an intentional distance to it. You’re made to watch it, not to fully experience it. For that, Six decided to wait for the second film to put the audience in that seat.

It’s hard to tell which film is supposed to be funnier: *The Human Centipede* or *The Human Centipede II*. There’s a weird madcap flavor in the first film, in a manner where it takes a great deal of pleasure in poking fun at the audience. The second one seems to be aimed more at the critics of the first film, amping up the situation to 11, but in a meta context. The first film was met with middling reviews, arguing that its gross out nature undermined any of its other artistic merits. Its social commentary was thin to critics like *Variety*’s Peter DeBruge, but making it more overt maybe would have diverted from its purpose. *The New York Times*’ Jeannette Catsoulis questioned if the film was “a commentary on Nazi atrocities or a literal expression of filmmaking politics,” an opinion that nicely refused to write the film off entirely. The latter is an interesting piece of conjecture: could the melding of different bodies be a manifestation of postmodernism in film? Everything is a remix, as they say, and thusly, *The Human Centipede* pulls from a variety of courses to create its own thing. Calling a work of art Frankenstein’s Monster is nothing new, but how soon will it be before we call a





piece “a Human Centipede”?

The film is particularly notable for its tagline: “100% Medically Accurate.” It is not. Of course it’s not. Maybe in Dr. Heiter’s head, but nowhere else the operation, as told by Dr. Heiter, goes like this:

“We start with cutting the ligamentum patellae, the ligaments of the kneecaps, so knee extension is no longer possible. Pull from B and C the central incisors, the lateral incisors and canines from the upper and lower jaws. The lips from B and C, and the anus of A and B are cut circular along the border between skin and mucosa, the mucous cutaneous zone. Two pedicled grafts are prepared and lifted from their underlying tissue. The V-shaped incisions below the chins of B and C up to the cheeks, connecting the circular mucosa and skin parts of anus and mouth from A to B and B to C. Connect the pedicled grafts to the chin-cheek incisions from A to B and B to C, creating a Siamese triplet, connected via the gastric system. Ingestion by A passes through B to the excretion of C. A human centipede, first sequence.”

Film School Rejects contacted Louise Stuart Owen, M.D. in October 2013, asking to what degree the tagline was truthful, if at all, and her response was unsurprising. There is first the unlikelihood that the operation could be performed safely in a basement, of all places. Second, Dr. Owen said, “Surgeons are not trained in how to administer pain medication or

ventilation for a surgical procedure. That is the job of the anesthesiologist.” Third, you couldn’t really keep those bodies together. In essence, the vomiting, or even moving, of the patients would break down the whole monster. (*Vice* also interviewed Dr. Philip Coakley, who had much the same reaction).

So, with a flat out ‘No,’ why is *The Human Centipede* as resonant as it is? As far as body horror goes, it’s as “medically realistic” and “plausible” as *Re-Animator*, which is to say not at all. Perhaps it’s because that such a surgery looks like it could be done. It’s not the actual re-animation of dead body parts, it’s the sewing together of them. It *isn’t* totally unrealistic if you’re not a medical professional. There’s a clever, maybe even inadvertent amount of verisimilitude here. (Are there politics of sexuality involved? After all,



rimming is having a moment in pop culture).

Yet, the tagline is able to key into the very gimmicky 'based on a true story' taglines that films from *The Haunting in Connecticut* to *The Strangers* insist on using in order to create an illusory feel of 'authenticity.' This film is the opposite of authentic. So Catsouli's assertion that the film is about filmmaking politics resonates considerably more with just the consideration of the tagline.

Despite the fact that *The Human Centipede* garnered perfectly acceptable, average reviews, the sequel feels like a pervasive attack on all the critics, and audiences, that took the film too seriously. Martin (Laurence R. Harvey) is obsessed with the first film. Diminutive, obese, and suffering from a mental illness, the only thing he does is watch the film on a loop and write in sketchbook. He wants to make the fictional film a reality. Not unlike the tagline for Wes Craven's *Scream*, he took his love of horror films (one particular film) one step too far. Or several steps. Maybe an entire continent.

Martin, unlike the good doctor of the previous film, isn't a medical 'professional.' Nor is he a 'regular' audience member. It's problematic, but the character we are given is the most dangerous and prone to hostility. He was abused by his father; his mother hates him; his psychiatrist exploits the vulnerabilities he reveals in confidence. He's the archetype that right-wing politicians paint when they talk about people who shouldn't play violent video games or watch hyper violent films. Martin, though, is just as ridiculous as Dr. Heiter, but in a scarier way. There's an odd sympathy that's attached to Martin, no matter how crazy or mentally ill he is. He's gone through hell, he's lonely and introverted.

The Human Centipede II hardly excuses the actions Martin takes, which makes the film strangely more complex than its predecessor. The film is Six's an-

swer to critics, asking them, "What, do you think *this* will happen?" To imply that a real-life Martin will pop up is a bit disingenuous. It seems to be a disservice to the fun Six wants to have, but also imply that the caricature that Six has created in the form of Martin actually exists. Martin is a tool to examine reactions to this kind of material in a real world, but, despite this, there is a human element to Martin. Dr. Heiter is an intentional caricature, inhuman for the purposes of practicing on other humans. But what makes Martin's experiment *not* work in some ways is that, whatever baggage he has, he is still human.

The Human Centipede 2 is cruder in its construction of its titular design (just a bunch of people stapled to one another), and, while still grotesque, the film is more interested in studying Martin. To an extent, Six is suggesting there is a monster in all of us, even if of the meekest sort, and

"What if The Human Centipede 3 ends up departing from Medical Horror altogether? What will that mean for the franchise's thematic cohesion?"

that there is humanity in all of us, even those most sadistic. It is an examination of a person with mental illness, and yet it's still weirdly compelling. Other films, such as von Trier's *The Idiots*, may have handled the topic better, but Six nonetheless places you in the headspace (for better or worse) of its protagonist. It takes its time to step away from the vileness of it all and make the audience experience the same pain, crushing loneliness, and palpable anxiety that Martin feels. It's an interesting tactic for an exploitation, though hardly "new." Six is suggesting a more empathetic approach to even the most sickening individuals.

What will *The Human Centipede 3* look like when it's finished being, ahem, sewn together? Its tagline is that it will be "100% Politically Incorrect," which seems to suggest that Six is going further into

commentary. Dieter Laser and Laurence R. Harvey will star, and the film will take place in a prison with a 500 person long centipede. In a teaser audio clip, Laser can be heard yelling "waterboarding." In a promotional image, the two are seen walking down a prison hall, with arms sprouting from cells and Laser sporting the garb of a sheriff and Harvey the costume of a prison warden. Six says the film will be "less gross," which, frankly, doesn't mean much. He says it'll be a "complete departure" from the series, which, again, means very little. In a description of the plot, Six remains coy, but says the film is "very American". What could that mean? (Besides the fact that Eric Roberts is in it). One could argue that each film in the as-yet-complete trilogy goes deeper into some sort of commentary, but while the first two films seemed to be primarily medically based in some manner (the

anxiety of the first film, the mental illness of the second), it seems as if Six is aiming more politically for the third. Centipede is the New Black, anyone? Could Six be tackling the American justice system, or possibly health care? What

if *The Human Centipede 3* ends up departing from Medical Horror altogether? What will that mean for the franchise's thematic cohesion? Should the director be believed, *The Final Sequence* might actually be the kind of daring non-horror aficionados can get on board with. There are seeds of astute thought and probes at interesting questions in the films which he, with varying degrees, backs off from in order to let the visceral nature of the films take over. Maybe he'll go no holds barred with this one, not from a graphic standpoint, but from a critical, political one. Who will be the monsters this time around: the creator or the created?



BLAZMAGICK

By Kat Ellinger



TWO TASTY VINTAGE Amicus classics, *Tales from the Crypt* (1972) and *The Vault of Horror* (1973), comprise a fantastic new double header Blu-Ray release from Shout!. Amicus—one time contender for the British horror crown as rivals to leading studio Hammer—set about making their own mark on the genre with a series of portmanteau films: full length features split into four or five anthology segments and associated by a wrap around plot. These two titles allowed Milton Subotsky's production unit to carve out their own niche. A far cry from the Hammer established classical gothic vibe, Amicus served up these pieces with a generous spoonful of '70s kitsch, plenty of grand guignol flair, and a bit of tongue-in-cheek humor. Perfect viewing if you don't want to chow down on something feature-length, the episodic nature of the various plotlines make them a quick and easy fun frolic. *Tales from the Crypt* is influenced directly by the EC comics of the same name—and captures the pulp fiction sentiment of its original source. As a set, both films unleash a world of vampires, ghouls, vicious murder, mystery, crazy supernatural themes, and some more weird and wonderful fla-

vors—all gleefully dished out with a morbid sting. *Tales from the Crypt* features one of Peter Cushing's most touching performances of his lengthy time in the genre in the segment *Poetic Justice*, and it is well worth picking up on that basis alone.

From one icon to another, the King of Spanish horror Paul Naschy has been criminally underrepresented in the digital domain, especially in English speaking territories. However, the tide is starting to turn with these two spectacular releases from Subkultur Entertainment. A limited, English-friendly, and gorgeous edition of *La Noche de Walpurgis* aka *Werewolf Versus The Vampire Woman* was released on BD late in 2014, and set the expectation high for further Naschy releases from the German-based label. As Naschy this time steps into the shoes of his well-travelled cursed lycanthrope Waldemar Daninsky to fight it out with a pair of seductive floaty vampettes, *La Noche de Walpurgis* loads on the gothic charm and Euro-cult sleazy atmosphere by the bucket load. Here, in high definition, the print is so strongly defined that you can almost taste that fog machine. While the provision of the original Spanish audio with English



subtitles allows the work to really shine in its intended form—no more dodgy Naschy English dubbing!

At the end of February, Subkultur follow-up with another highly anticipated Naschy related release: *Die Vampire Des Dr. Dracula* aka *La Marca del Hombre Lobo* or the more curious American title



Frankenstein's Bloody Terror (1968). The film sees Naschy set those first foundations for his Daninsky heritage in exquisite baroque style. The first—and arguably one of the best—in the series, the atmosphere comes loaded with gothic splendor, beautiful mood lighting, and stand-out set pieces. While the narrative throws in a bit of everything; masquerade balls, striking leading man—as Naschy lays out his moves as the perfect anti-hero—, family curses, gypsies, Satanic vampires, and the titular Wolf man portrayed in true Naschy style. Restored in splendid form to its true glory, both this, and the aforementioned *Werewolf Versus The Vampire Woman*, are essential buys for all fans of classic gothic or Euro-cult flair.

Lovecraft's West World

By Alex Weirstein



Like (pans)
pteridophytes.
early dears
young are
nourished from
thalloids or
mollusks

did not
always
vertebrate
probably
originally
in era of sea
Plants - carbon
organisms -

THE EARLIER PLAN BY GAHAN WILSON
ARKHAM

MASSACHUSETTS
LOVECRAFT

OF COMMERCE

Herbert West: Reanimate
By H. P. LOVECRAFT

Here's the fourth episode in this



A window into the literal and figurative sickness of its legendary author, H.P. Lovecraft's Mad Scientist mythos, "Herbert West-Reanimator," has survived obscurity and endures in popular culture.

The Boy with the Hideous Face

TO HIM, THE players of the medical world were neither a cause for celebration nor invariably corruptible, but a great, big, cruel joke.

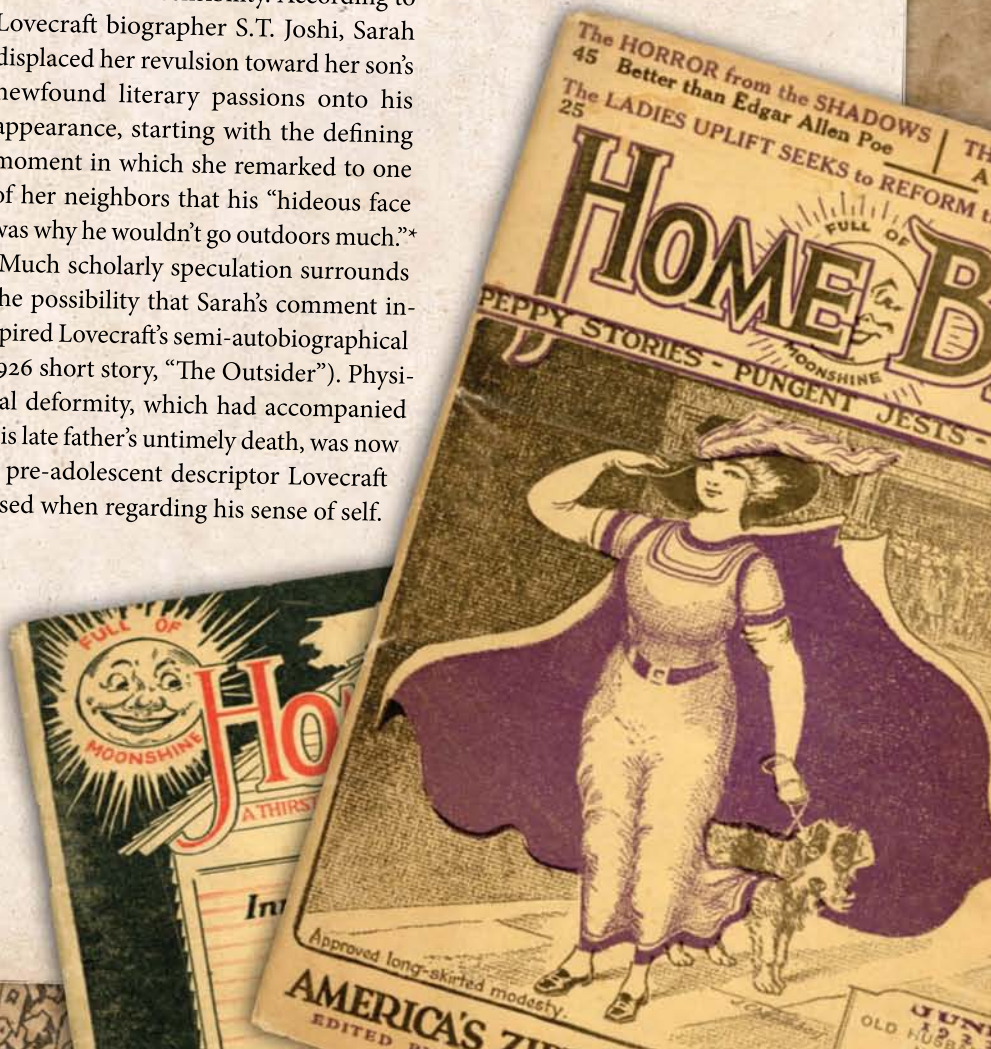
He was Howard Phillips Lovecraft, born August 20, 1890, to mother Sarah Susan Phillips Lovecraft and father Winfield Scott Lovecraft, a traveling salesman of jewelry and precious metals. The pale boy was placed in lace, his flowing hair curled into effeminate Victorian locks by his mother until his father cut it, shattering her delusional dreams of rearing a daughter and sending her into a fitful rage. At three, he saw Winfield dissipate from family life into the oblivion of Butler Hospital in their hometown of Providence, Rhode Island, acutely psychotic, where he would die of syphilis on July 19, 1898. He often complained of illness, missed school with regularity, and found refuge in the great works of Homer and Thomas Bulfinch and oral ghost stories—all bestowed upon him by his grandfather, Whipple Van Buren Phillips, who recognized Howard's prodigiousness when the boy began writing complete poems at the age of six. Conventional wisdom points to his ailments being psychosomatic, nervous maladies that Sarah, with her overbearing maternalism, likely embraced as good reason to shirk his responsibilities of attending

public school during a time in which such attendance was not compulsory.

Though it prompted Sarah to enable her son's absence from academia, Lovecraft's illness was not the only cause for why he abstained from wandering off the reservation. Whipple had transfixed the boy's imagination with Gothic yarn, encouraging a storytelling style that gravely offended Howard's mother's Puritanical sensibility. According to Lovecraft biographer S.T. Joshi, Sarah displaced her revulsion toward her son's newfound literary passions onto his appearance, starting with the defining moment in which she remarked to one of her neighbors that his "hideous face was why he wouldn't go outdoors much."* (Much scholarly speculation surrounds the possibility that Sarah's comment inspired Lovecraft's semi-autobiographical 1926 short story, "The Outsider"). Physical deformity, which had accompanied his late father's untimely death, was now a pre-adolescent descriptor Lovecraft used when regarding his sense of self.

The further detached Lovecraft was from life in the public space of late-19th century New England, the more in touch with his own vision of its reality he became.

In the days following Whipple's sudden death on March 28, 1904, by what L. Sprague De Camp, in *Lovecraft: a biography*, describes as a "paralytic shock," Sarah ran the estate he bequeathed to her



into the ground. Lovecraft, now 14, had developed a keen interest in astronomy over the previous six years, his intellectual precocity compensating for his limited schooling. In the boy's burgeoning consciousness, his fascination with the vastness of the cosmos overlapped with his realization that his haven at 194 Angell Street was now lost to financial ruin; he and Sarah would inevitably relocate to a smaller home at 598 Angell Street, some three blocks down from the Lovecrafts' once-proud Providence estate. As quickly as his mind had expanded to grasp our terrestrial world's insignificance in the universe, Lovecraft's own private world had also been proven fragile, full of unstable meaning. Mental awakening, spiritual despair, and constant physical ailment, all crucial elements of the early childhood through which young Lovecraft had thus far lived, were poised to plague his existence and fuel his literary canon, its bleak imagining of Americana, and its deep-seated New England roots.



Young H.P. Lovecraft with mother Sarah Susan Phillips Lovecraft and father Winfield Scott Lovecraft

An Indifferent Cosmos

“MY MOTHER, SHOWING no signs of recovery, has gone to a hospital, where she is receiving the most expert care which medical science can afford,” wrote Lovecraft in a letter to Reinhardt Kleiner, one of his earliest correspondents, on March 19, 1919. Hysteria and depression had so consumed Sarah that fate would steer her to Butler Hospital, where her late husband had only just gone to die. Lovecraft remained hopeful that the move would improve her condition. “[M]any features of diet & regimen which the physicians are prescribing, are directly opposite to those prescribed by the previous practitioner. She herself seems satisfied with the treatment, & is more optimistic than at any time for a month before,” he told Kleiner. At the same time, his separation from his mother worsened his physiological state and nearly debilitated Lovecraft, who, from 1908 to 1917, had foregone a period of intense reclusion af-

“Mental awakening, spiritual despair, and constant physical ailment, all crucial elements of the childhood through which young Lovecraft lived, were poised to plague his existence and fuel his literary canon.”

ter dropping out of high school. “My own energy is spasmodic. For days at a time I can do nothing,” he concluded in the letter to “dear Klei.”

The first recipient of Lovecraft's self-published journal of social and political commentary, *The Conservative*, Kleiner was among a growing network of friends and colleagues Lovecraft cultivated as he

became increasingly immersed in the world of amateur journalism. Just as he clung to the optimistic notion that Butler Hospital would nurse his mother back to prime mental and physical wellness, so too did Lovecraft, the now-burgeoning writer and thinker, perceive amateur journalism as a promising beacon of hope. Two years prior to the year Lovecraft

wrote his letter warning Klei of his mother's waning health, W. Paul Cook, publisher and editor of the amateur press publication, *The Vagrant*, had encouraged a 27-year-old Lovecraft to write "Dagon." The short story, whose titular creature, an ancient, fish-like giant intent on dominating humanity, sprung forth from the depths of one of Lovecraft's night terrors, was the author's first to be printed. It was as though Lovecraft lived his life in opposition to the musings of his fiction: believing in divine miracles that could revive his ailing mother and rescue his floundering career from obscurity, yet displacing a sense of existential dread about otherworldly entities into his self-designed literary universe.

"My mother's health remains so stationary that I fear present arrangements must be considered as semi-permanent," Lovecraft bemoaned in a letter to Klei on June 17, 1919. "Nerves have always been the bane of the Phillips family!" Despite the physicians of Butler Hospital's optimistic prognosis for Sarah, the tone of Lovecraft's correspondence with his friend shifted to great anxiety about what his mother's doomed future held for her, and for him. Was the Lovecraft bloodline targeted for extinction? Would

he be next?

As these fears permeated his psyche, Lovecraft flooded the pages of *The Conservative* with xenophobic tirades against what he perceived as "the most alarming tendency observable in this age, a growing disregard for the established forces of law and order" amongst America's immigrant population. For all his life, Lovecraft and his relatives had fancied themselves Rhode Island's standard-bearers of aristocratic grandeur; "the Phillips line," notes Joshi, "goes back

very far in Providence history, as early as the late 17th century. The Lovecraft side originates in England, back to the 15th century. There were Lovecrafts, or Lovecrofts, in Devon." Born out of time, struggling to uphold antiquated ideals passed down by his Mayflower-driven ancestors, Lovecraft scowled at the increasingly modernized American landscape upon which he peered through the win-



TOP: Angell Street, Providence, where Lovecraft grew up.
MIDDLE: H.P. Lovecraft, circa 1892.
BOTTOM: Lovecraft at nine years old.

dows of his attic. The embittered recluse's unease surrounding his family's rapid deterioration was displaced onto America's melting pot. Who were these alien beings, these Asians, Blacks, Europeans, Jews who were shaking the foundations of his Anglophilic beliefs? These 'Others' who had already surpassed Lovecraft in their pursuit of the very monetary means he had presumed he was owed simply for having been born?

At the hands of Butler Hospital's surgeons, Sarah died on May 24, 1921 during a botched gall bladder operation. Because his family was *his* world, Lovecraft's ideas about *the* world, inflected with his personal biases, became pessimistic at best. In the same way the Lovecraft clan seemed damned to generational erosion, the cosmos, he surmised, also failed, over time, to favor or even recognize the plight of human existence. Today, 'Cosmicism' is the loaded term commonly associated with the philosophy Lovecraft—now motherless, financially in shambles, desperate to compensate for an ineptitude in mathematics that barred him from becoming



Lovecraft with Frank Belknap Long in Brooklyn, circa 1931.

an astronomer, fascinated with esoteric knowledge—began, during this time, to formulate. Emeritus Professor of English at Indiana University, William F. Touponce, in *Lord Dunsany, H.P. Lovecraft, and Ray Bradbury: Spectral Journeys*, characterizes Lovecraft's worldview as "cosmic or scientific indifferentism." "Its central tenet," Touponce

explains, "was the notion that nothing in life really mattered from a cosmic point of view."

Despite his deep desire to know the absolute reality of his volatile environment, Lovecraft concluded he could not. He clung to traditional culture, symbols, and values in defiance of modernity, and resolved to build a world whose characters and settings reflected an indifferent cosmos.

Building West World

"I AM NOW A professional fiction writer—albeit in a very limited sense," Lovecraft reported in a letter to his colleague in the National Amateur Press Association (NAPA), Anne Tillery Renshaw, on October 3, six months after his mother had passed. The 50th President of NAPA, George Julian Houtain, had just founded a humor magazine entitled *Home Brew*, and requested that Lovecraft contribute to it, as he explained in an October 8 letter to his friend and mentor Frank Belknap Long, "a series of six gruesome tales, all with the same central character, at the munificent price of \$5.00 each!" The character to which this letter refers is one Dr. Herbert West, the overzealous inventor of a "reagent" solution with which he is hellbent on reanimating dead corpses. Both West's alma mater, Miskatonic University Medical School, and its location, the dark town of Arkham, Massachusetts, would first materialize in the series—which he gave "the generic caption 'Herbert West-Reanimator'"—as staples of Lovecraft's grand mythos-in-the-making. In tension with his conviction that, as he asserted to Long,



"[f]iction written to order is not art, whilst any series involves forcing and repetition of the most unclassical sort," "Herbert West-Reanimator" posits an unmistakably Lovecraftian vision: of a New England navigable by the arrogant Dr. West only with an amoral compass.

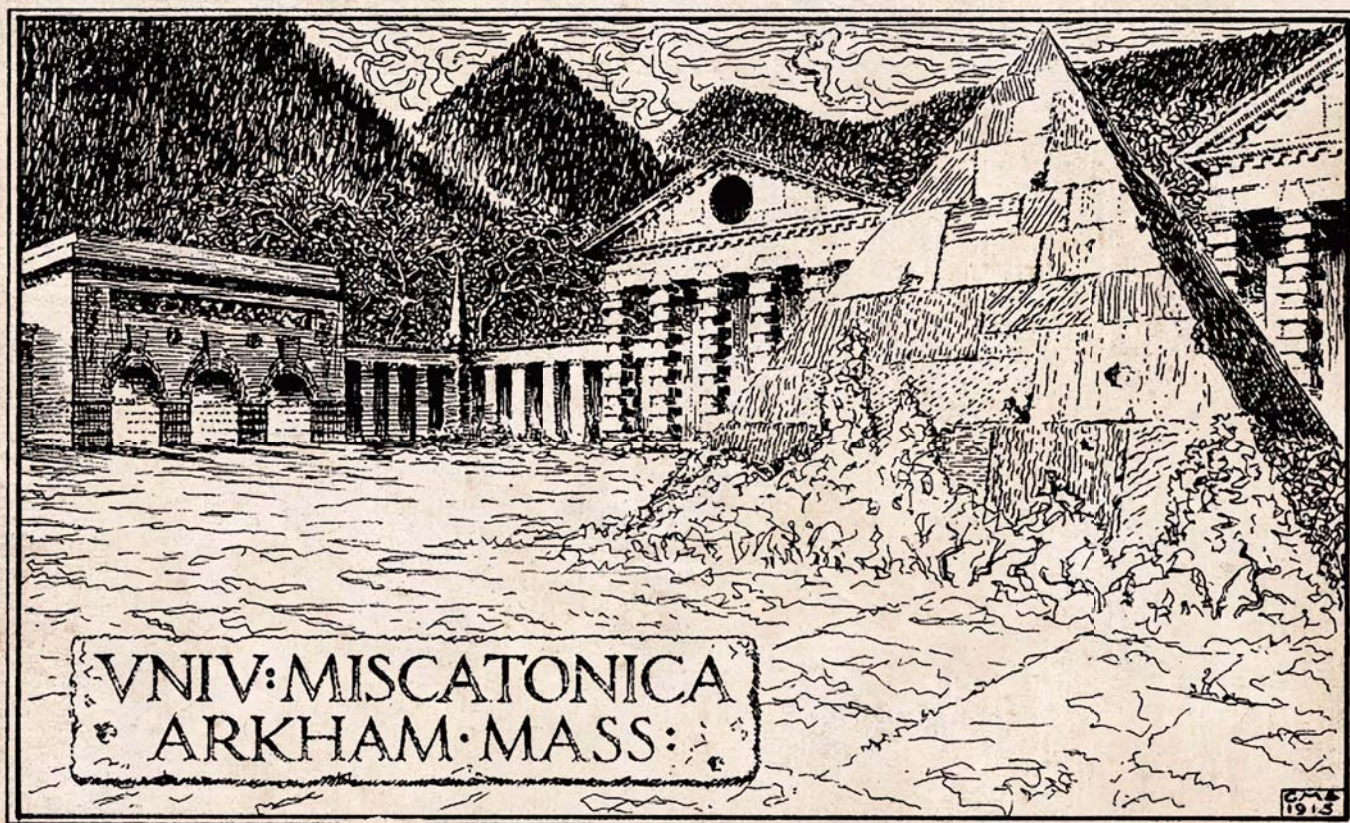
"Houtain said: 'You can't make them too morbid,' and I have taken him at his word!," Lovecraft explained to Renshaw. "Herbert West-Reanimator," Lovecraft accepted, would have to incorporate an unrestrained satirical edge, taking to outlandish extremes the straight-faced science fiction of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in a contemporary context. Published in the debut issue of *Home Brew* in February 1922, the first tale in the series, entitled "From the Dark," aligns readers with the perspective of its unnamed narrator, West's accomplice, as he recalls West's exploits: "Of Herbert West, who was my friend in college and in after life, I can speak only with extreme terror," reads the tale's opening line. The plainly worded introduction seethes with Lovecraft's revulsion toward the medical practitioners that had yet to cure his debilitating ail-

"'Herbert West-Reanimator' posits an unmistakably Lovecraftian vision: of a New England navigable by the arrogant Dr. West only with an amoral compass."

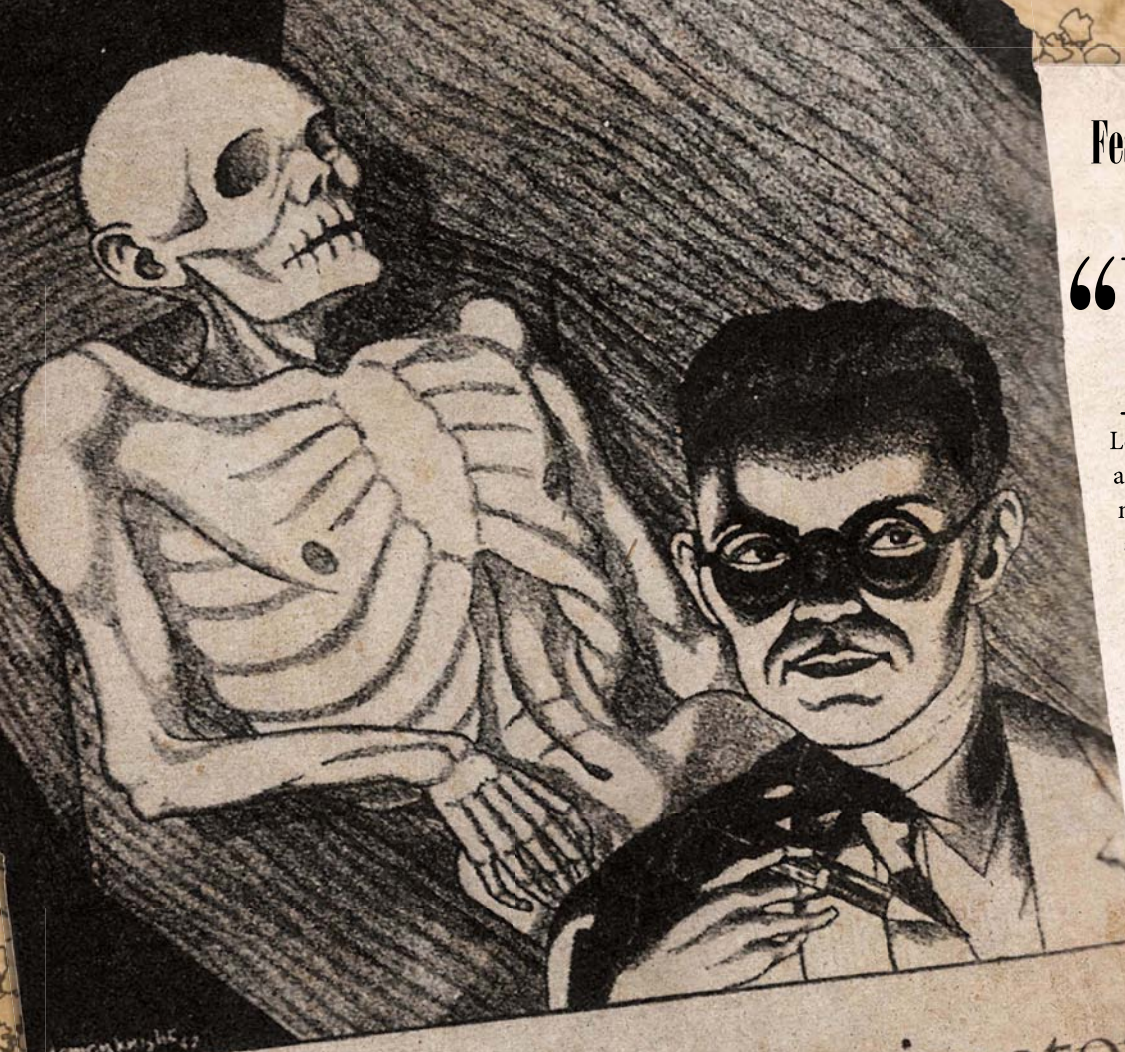
ments and seemed to have allowed the deaths of his parents.

If the narrator introduced in "From the Dark" is Lovecraft's personal grief committed to the page, West, a possessor of consequential knowledge in the community in which he lives, acts similarly as a conduit for the author's Cosmicist ideas. "[A]ll life is a chemical and physical process...the so-called 'soul' is a myth," the narrator explains, subliminally crystallizing Lovecraft's own belief system as he characterizes West's. "[M]y friend believed that the reanimation of the dead can depend only on the condition of the

tissues...That the psychic or intellectual life might be impaired by the slight deterioration of sensitive brain-cells which even a short period of death would be apt to cause, West fully realized." "So-called 'soul': for West, the alliteration mocks religious orthodoxy, for Lovecraft's readers, it likely mocked West's God-complex; in both cases, there is laughter in morbidity to be had. To Lovecraft, West is a genius and an idiot—emboldened by his understanding of the human body as pure mechanism and death as a mere system malfunction, made foolish and insignificant by his aspiration to defy death in a



skatonic University, Arkham, Massachusetts, built 1797; drawn by G. M. Sinclair, 1915. (from 'and, by George M. Sinclair, Boston 1915).



Herbert West: Reanimator

By H. P. LOVECRAFT

Here's the fourth episode in this spine-refrigerating series—in which a young

Puritanical society.

That West, as Lovecraft's narrator establishes in "From the Dark," "...came into conflict with the college authorities" illustrates the extent to which the dean of Miskatonic University, Dr. Allan Halsey, forbids the titular doctor's unorthodox methods. Dr. Halsey's condemnation of West's experiments with his "reagent" on animals creates, within the story's narrative subtext, a blurring of the distinction between the figurative 'head' of the Miskatonic administrative body West undermines, and the literal bodies he and his accomplice begin to rob from their graves for human testing at "From the

Dark"'s conclusion.

Not for nothing does the narrator recall West's emphasis on the importance of the "extreme freshness of his specimens." From a medical perspective, this Lovecraftian flourish, er-herm, livens the quasi-scientific background of the series' inevitable zombie-laden proceedings. With respect to these words' subtler implications, they metaphorically mirror the "freshness" of West's modernity that poses a threat to the stable, old-guard foundations the "learned and benevolent" Halsey seeks to preserve. In all but five pages, Lovecraft's West World, an atmosphere in which Dr. Herbert West's youthful hubris squares off against Arkham's ancient order, was now open for business.

Fear and Self-Loathing in New England

“NEVER TRY TO write a story, but wait till a story *has to be* written. When I set to work deliberately to fashion a tale, the result is cheap and flat,” Lovecraft wrote on February 8 in a letter to Long. Regret over commodifying the “Herbert West-Reanimator” series weighed heavily on the author’s conscience. “All series are inartistic,” Lovecraft grunted, “since they involve tedious repetitions, and weak stretching out of the idea. ... [W]hat a miserable result I have achieved!” Suffocated by borderline poverty in the wake of his mother’s death that could not be overcome by his pathetic returns, Lovecraft was now living with his aunts, Lillian D. Clark and Annie E. Phillips Gamwell, as he continued to crank out installments of his six-part serial for Houtain’s humor ‘zine—the “vile rag,” as his embittered letters had now come to know it. He sensed his social and economic de-

stabilization infecting his work like a disease.

Accordingly, Lovecraft’s empathy for America’s illness-stricken populace is strewn about the pages of his second edition of “Herbert West-Reanimator,” “The Plague-Daemon,” published in *Home Brew* in March 1922. The ramifications of a nation-wide typhoid epidemic that raged in Chicago at the turn of the 20th century and had made its way to the east coast, including areas in and around Boston, were all but faded from recent memory. If not certain, it is at least worth speculating (and perhaps quite likely) that Lovecraft had been made aware of the startling case of Mary Mallon, a New York-based cook who had immigrated

from Ireland and become the first carrier of typhoid fever to be identified and traced in the United States, causing 53 cases, three deaths, and earning her the press nickname of "Typhoid Mary" in the process. In Mallon, Lovecraft might have seen some semblance of his late mother; both public health authorities' insistence that Mallon either remove her gall bladder or quit her career as a cook and her subsequent isolation in a hospital bore echoes of Sarah's health history and tragic fate. With these realities in mind, it is unsurprising that in "The Plague-Daemon," Dr. Herbert West, now a vessel for Lovecraft's consciousness, takes his medical malpractice to new heights by capitalizing on the myriad of dead bodies supplied by an epidemiological mortality rate: "I shall never forget that hideous summer sixteen years ago," the narrator begins, "when like a noxious afrite...typhoid stalked leeringly through Arkham. It is by that satanic scourge that most recall the year, for truly terror brooded with bat-wings over the piles of coffins in the tombs of Christchurch Cemetery; yet for me there is a greater horror in that time—a horror known to me alone that

"Lovecraft's empathy for America's illness-stricken populace is strewn about the pages of 'Herbert West-Reanimator.'"

Herbert West has disappeared."

To call lines such as these top-heavy in adjectives feels like unintentional praise. Lovecraft had intended to write "Herbert West-Reanimator" as a parody, and indeed he succeeded, though perhaps more on the level of parodying his batshit (and bat-winged) baroque style than parodying the more distinguished Shelley novel to which the serial alludes. And with this assertion, countless times the author agreed! "To write to order involves the violation of all that spontaneity and singleness of impression which should characterise short story work," he pined in a letter to Long, turning away from his final draft of "The Plague-Daemon" in disgust. "It reduces the unhappy author to the commonplace level of mechanical and unimaginative hack-work. Nevertheless,

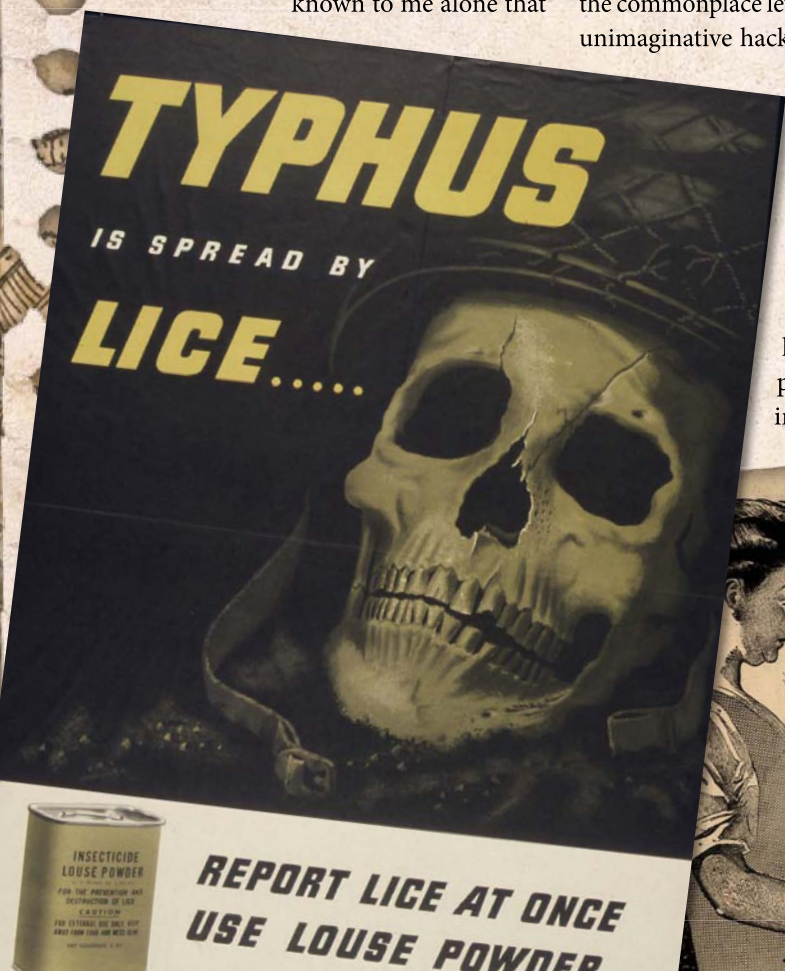
when one needs the money one is not scrupulous."

So long as his pockets were far from deep, Lovecraft dug deeper into the recesses of his so-called soul and persisted in expanding his West World,

which was fast defining itself as compelling with regard to its substance—notably cognizant of the time and place in which it continued to be published—and yet, alas, a stylistic miscalculation.

On one hand, "The Plague-Daemon," to its credit, details the symbolic, typhoid-induced death of Dr. Halsey, "the fearless dean" who "had become a popular hero" through his attempts to cure Arkham's citizens of the disease—"though he seemed unconscious of his fame as he struggled to keep from collapsing with physical fatigue and nervous exhaustion," the narrator explains. This plot development, and West's reckless reanimation of Halsey's corpse that ensues, again underscore Lovecraft's interweaving of real-world events with a Cosmicist twist—the ironic notion that, despite Halsey's best humanitarian efforts and West's spiteful appropriation of his late rival's body, neither man attains their desired form of significance in the cosmos. (Whereas Halsey succumbs to what he tries to eradicate, West endangers the entire community when his vindictive human testing on Halsey backfires, turning the former pride of Miskatonic into a cannibalistic zombie who beats the two doctors unconscious and murders over

a dozen unwitting townspeople before being institutionalized by local police). In his third "Herbert West-Reanimator" story, "Six Shots by Moonlight," Lovecraft also went to great lengths to ensure that the



"Lovecraft had built his West World on personal and collective fears and loathing toward doctors, foreigners, and modernity. But along the way, that loathing had turned inward."

series' universe retain its resemblance to the American social climate. The story's inclusion of a moonlighting boxer as a major personage in its plot is consistent with the laws of the land, which had banned boxing in the US until roughly the same window of time in which typhoid had reached its peak.

On the other hand, "Six Shots by Moonlight," published in the April 1922 issue of *Home Brew*, falls victim to the trappings of a bluntly racist ideology. Yes, most first readers of this story would not have so much as flinched at Lovecraft's now-controversial descriptiveness of the body of an African-American boxer upon which West and his accomplice experiment. And yet, from the author, whose tainted erudition had given way to a (fortunately unpublished) poem entitled "On the Creation of Niggers" a decade prior, his narrator's introduction of Buck Robinson, "The Harlem Smoke," in the third episode of Herbert West's saga must have felt, as it does today, like a special kind of loathing. "The negro had been knocked out, and a moment's examination shewed us that he would permanently remain so," the narrator starts, continuing: "He was a loathsome, gorilla-like thing, with abnormally long arms which I could not help calling fore legs, and a face that conjured up unspeakable Congo secrets and tomtom poundings under an eerie moon." For the first time in a published work, Lovecraft had given voice to the basest fears that plagued the American psyche and his own, codifying black bodies as abnormal, even subhuman, and as much a threat to the national body as any widespread fever.

"I have lately completed the fourth of the West tales, entitled 'The Scream of the Dead,' and formed a synopsis of the fifth, to

be call'd 'The Horror from the Shadows.' I shall be glad when the burthen of this hack labour is removed from my back." Lovecraft's announcement came in a letter to Klei shortly after Herbert West, in his third adventure, had "suddenly, excitedly, and unnecessarily emptied all six chambers of his revolver into the nocturnal visitor," the boxer who had transformed into a zombie despite first being "wholly unresponsive to every solution we injected in its black arm; solutions prepared from experience with white specimens only." West, once an eccentric-yet-decent scientist, was now full-blown mad, his descent sparked by the chaotic violence of a humanoid creature unpredictable and un-white; the doctor was now a murderer. "The Scream of the Dead" to which Lovecraft's fourth tale refers would come from West and his accomplice's next test subject, a "well-dressed stranger," who, as told to the narrator by West, "had paused at our cottage to ask the way to the factories," whose "heart had become greatly overtaxed...had refused a stimulant, and had suddenly dropped dead only a moment later." At the story's conclusion, the narrator, thus far complicit with West's actions and vision of modern medicine, discovers two things: First, the stranger, who howls "...keep that damned needle away from me!" after regaining consciousness, had not died from natural causes, but was killed by West, acting on impulse to retrieve the freshest specimen possible. Second, West had gone beyond the bounds of reason, resorting to taking human life in order to 'give' it.

Aware that his narrator's already skewed moral code had, in the wake of West's willingness to murder, been greatly offended, Lovecraft set "The Horror From

the Shadows," his penultimate West tale, outside the realm of Arkham and its distinctive milieu. Situated in St. Eloi, Belgium, West and his accomplice, now serving as medics in the Canadian Armed Services during World War I, could have their cake and eat it too—resuming their collection of rapidly piled-up fresh corpses and justifying the context in which their lives had been taken. Even in extraterritorial space, West imposes his biological theories on the mechanistic nature of the human body: "He had wild and original ideas on the independent vital properties of organic cells and nerve-tissue separated from natural physiological systems," says the narrator, "and achieved some hideous preliminary results in the form of never-dying, artificially nourished tissue obtained from the nearly hatched eggs of an indescribable tropical reptile." What to make of West's close association with reptile and human biology? Is this another implicit suggestion that foreign influence—even indirect, as in the case of West's American-borne, now Belgium-based experiments—inevitably devolves the human species? Or had Lovecraft, before neuroscientist Paul D. Maclean hypothesized in the 1960s that rage in human beings is caused by our brains' "reptilian complex," correctly guessed such a correlation in his war-time tale?

Lovecraft finished his final chapter of "Herbert West-Reanimator," "The Tomb-Legions," in June 1922, just in time to print in *Home Brew*'s sixth issue. "The burden was frightful, the pay a myth after the second cheque," he summarily wrote in a letter to Klei on June 17, awaiting a still unpaid \$20 from Houtain. The story, whose delirious narrator recollects the

events leading up to West being devoured by a horde of reanimated zombies, extends the scope of *West World* to encompass an oddly autobiographical sense of place. Upon returning from World War I, West, whose “once-normal scientific zeal for prolonging life,” the narrator attests, “had subtly degenerated into a mere morbid and ghoulish curiosity and secret sense of charnel picturesqueness,” now dwells in “a venerable house of much elegance, overlooking one of the oldest burying-grounds in Boston.” Slyly, West chooses his last residence next to the ancient catacombs knowing its “colonial period” stylings are perceived by the public as “of little use to a scientist seeking very fresh bodies.” The doctor, here, like Lovecraft, willingly ensconces himself in an atmosphere of centuries-old influence, shutting out and protecting himself from a world with which he is ultimately incompatible.

On November 12, 1922, Lovecraft sent a package to his pulp-writing brother-in-arms, Clark Ashton Smith. “The enclosed published series, ‘Herbert West-Reanimator,’” read the package’s accompanying letter, “represents my poorest work—stuff done to order for a vulgar magazine, & written down to the herd’s level.” Lovecraft had built his *West World* on personal and collective fears and loathing toward doctors, foreigners, and modernity. But along the way, that loathing had turned inward; Klei’s “sorrow at the completion of my sinister stories is balanc’d [sic] by mine own delight,” he had quipped five months prior in one of his last letters that addressed the tales. The future still held torment for Lovecraft, but with Herbert West dead, his New England was a little more peaceful.

“Reanimator” Reconsidered

“I DON’T THINK YOU can ever correlate what people think or believe with what they write, or at least on the one-to-one basis so beloved of literary scholars, academics, and amateur psychologists,” says author and

Lovecraft aficionado Neil Gaiman. Should this assertion go unchallenged, “Herbert West-Reanimator” will remain as reducible as its ashamed author believed it to be. The story of Lovecraft’s life and the stories of Dr. Herbert West implore us to distrust absolutism like Gaiman’s in the same way they playfully distrust the medical community.

For most Lovecraft experts, “Herbert West-Reanimator” is an amusing footnote in a bibliography full of vastly more consequential titles. Little to no close formal analysis of its content exists, save for some considerable critical engagement by Joshi—and even he, in *An Epicure in the Terrible: A Centennial Anthology of Essays in Honor of H.P. Lovecraft*, writes it off as “universally acknowledged as Lovecraft’s poorest work.” In May 2014, *Salon* revealed the syllabus for a class taught by Pulitzer-Prize winning author Junot Díaz at MIT called “World-Building,” and despite its focus on important literary worlds’ “...primary features—spatial, cultural, biological, fantastic, cosmological,” Lovecraft’s *West World* appears neither as a prerequisite nor as a member of the course’s reading list. Revisitation of the series has resurged as recently as September 2014, though mostly to provide evidence in support of the World Fantasy Awards’ (WFA) announcement that it would discuss changing its awards statue—a bust of Lovecraft—to someone or something else so as to denounce his virulent bigotry. Should Lovecraft be reanimated to live in today’s world, in which both Díaz and the WFA champion the masterpieces of such progressive visionaries as Octavia Butler and China Miéville through their respective academic and honorary platforms, his letters may well adopt a very different tone indeed.

Lovecraft’s less-than-pristine present-day legacy notwithstanding, “Herbert West-Reanimator” has somehow leaped from insignificance and into our lexicon for over 70 years since the death of its architect from intestinal cancer in 1937. A wave of films sparked by Stuart Gordon’s critically acclaimed cult phe-

nomenon, *Re-Animator* (1985); over two decades of the *Splatterhouse* video game franchise, whose villain borrows his name from West; a long-standing tradition of comic adaptations including such titles as *Hack/Slash* (2004) and *Army of Darkness vs. Re-Animator* (2005); and more manage to re-integrate Lovecraft’s influence into discussions driven by modern sensibilities. Rife with rational and irrational phobias, fixations, and philosophical unrest, the series’ universe, along with the closely related letters recorded by its author, fossilizes the headspace of American Weird Fiction’s most fascinating icon.

We cannot grasp the totality of H.P. Lovecraft’s enigmatic existence, but toward it we can be anything but indifferent. On his gravestone is inscribed a defining line plucked from one of his letters: “I Am Providence.” Those words are just as true as these: in the shadows of the Western world, there is *West World*.

Editors’ Note: “Herbert West-Reanimator” has been reprinted numerous times since its debut in the pages of *Home Brew* in 1922. The passages of the series explored in this article appear as they are published in John Jude Palencar and Barbara Hambly’s *The Road to Madness: The Transition of H.P. Lovecraft* (Del Rey Books, 1996).

All letters by H.P. Lovecraft quoted in this article appear as they are published in *H.P. Lovecraft: Selected Letters I (1911–1924)* [Edited by August Derleth and Donald Wandrei; Arkham House Publishers, 1965].

* = This and all other quotes unattributed to a written work are cited from interviews in Frank H. Woodward’s 2008 documentary, *Lovecraft: Fear of the Unknown*.





YOU DON'T KNOW Jack

By Max Weinstein

On its 50th anniversary, exploitation legend Jack Hill's *Spider Baby* was restored and screened at The Academy Theater. To us, Hill suggests, the film makes more sense than it does to him.

ON THE HALLOWEEN weekend of 2014, The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and the New York University Orphan Film Symposium beamingly premiered their film archive's 35MM restoration of the 1968 cult classic, *Spider Baby*. Hosted at the Academy Theater in New York City, the event, according to a statement released by the Academy, "serves as an opportunity to re-discover and re-appreciate orphan films—rarely seen, previously neglected cinematic works deserving preservation and revival." Speaking with *Diabolique* just a day prior, *Spider Baby*'s writer-director, the prolific exploitation icon, Jack Hill, cackled at the honor he was about to receive. "Orphan films... I wasn't quite sure how they came up with that one, but it's fine if they want to call it an orphan film!," he told us with ironic detachment. "The obvious thing is the Academy likes [*Spider Baby*]. So we'll all get along. But I don't know what it is about the millennial generation that finds it so interesting."

Throughout our look back at his off-the-wall horror-comedy, "Don't know" became two recurring, operative

words of Hill's choosing. Considering *Spider Baby*'s fictional disease, Merrye Syndrome, which forces its major characters, the Merrye siblings—Elizabeth (Beverly Washburn), Ralph (Sid Haig), and Virginia (Jill Banner), respectively—into physical and mental regression, Hill admits: "I don't know what inspired it. It just came to me. I must've been smokin' dope. I don't know where ideas like that come from. When I get onto something like that, and I get a basic idea, I just try to

get flooded with all kinds of thoughts and ideas that I process or reject or whatever. Where the idea came from, I couldn't begin to recall."

Connecting the dots between *Spider Baby*'s Merryes, themselves orphans, raised by their voluntary guardian, Bruno, (the late, great Lon Chaney, Jr.) and the 'orphan' status of the film identified by the Academy is a prospect that, for Hill, only further amuses. ("Oh, I see where you're going," Hill says between chuckles). And





“I don’t know what inspired [*Spider Baby*]. It was 1964. I can’t go back to my thoughts at the time. I must’ve been smokin’ dope.” - Jack Hill

he offers one word about the extent to which he conducted medical background research to ground Merrye Syndrome in reality: “No!”

Yet, 10 years before the now-infamous Sawyer clan of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) would take their seats as American Horror’s walking, stalking metaphor for evolutionary degeneration, Hill had already completed *Spider Baby*—which meant his Merrye Clan had gotten there first. Uncertain of this fact, however, Hill casts doubts on *Spider Baby*’s resonance in 1968, when the film toured the country during its brief, limited theatrical release four years after its making. “I have to admit, I’ve never seen [*The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*]. But I met the director!” Hill explains. “So many people have suggested that Tobe Hooper must have had seen *Spider Baby*, but I doubt very much that he could possibly have seen it at that time. And it was never in my heart to actually ask him that question. But it’s true that weird minds think alike.”

A precursor to *Chain Saw*’s Viet-

nam War-informed critique of excessive violence, *Spider Baby*, like Hooper’s film, mines the absurdity of its roadside cannibals—whose violent traditions, passed down from one generation to the next, slowly eat the Merryes’ family unit from the inside out—for comedic effect. “When I grew up, most of the films that influenced me were films of the ‘40s,” Hill recalls. “A lot of those films had a lot of comedy relief. It wasn’t like slapstick, but it gave you a relief from the tension and so forth. I grew up with that, and more than anything else, that’s the approach I would take to make films.”

The significance of Merrye Syndrome’s name, then, might feel especially satirical. (“It seemed like a funny idea to me, that this horrible, horrible thing can be called ‘merry,’” Hill notes). Then again, ‘satire’ necessarily requires cultural consciousness of some sort, a state of mind that Hill once more denies having had, only to return to his favorite line: “I don’t know. It just came to me. I thought a dictionary of diseases would tip off right away where we were going,

to put that on the screen. It’s not named after [19th-century Ohio entrepreneur] Ebenezer Merry or something like that. I just came up with the name, so it makes sense as somebody’s name, but you can still get the impact across. I don’t know what else to say about it other than that. There’s no kind of plausible excuse, plausible foundation, for having these characters. It was 1964. I can’t go back to my thoughts at the time.”

Off the set, however, Hill did exercise some social activism, despite his inability to call back its surrounding details. “I marched in the streets,” Hill says. “I marched in the streets against the war, yeah, sure. I was out there. I don’t think there’s anything in the movie [about that], not that I’m aware of. People are always finding things in the movie that I’m not aware of. But it’s interesting to suggest.” In light of this seemingly coincidental set of circumstances, perhaps the ‘randomness’ of Hill’s style subconsciously echoes the random bursts of violence that punctuate the ‘60s’ chronological progression.

What about Hill’s wonky decision to make the Merrye family cannibals? The whole ‘meat thing,’ a noticeable thematic trend that *Spider Baby* set and *Texas Chain Saw* upheld? Was Hill a vegetarian by this point? “I am now, but I had no idea of any such thing at the time,” he shrugs. “The whole idea of cannibals that are vegetarians just struck me as, well, just, to me, funny. That’s all. In 1980 I became very spiritual and I just couldn’t eat meat anymore. But that’s a coincidence, I’m afraid. ...Well, nothing is a total coincidence.”

“The ‘60s was a time when censorship was still pretty stiff, in terms of ratings and stuff like that,” Hill continues, reflecting on the film’s timeliness, despite indie filmmaker William Lustig’s (of *Maniac* and *Vigilante* fame) assertion, at the Academy’s screening, for *Spider Baby*’s timelessness. “I wanted to do something that is not really gory and gruesome and violent. ...Well, I guess it is violent. But it’s kind of off-camera violence, mostly. If you go gruesome, you’re supposed to laugh, and I think the movie is fun. I’m always terrified when people don’t know



“My work has to be deconstructed by somebody else, not by me. I just did what I thought was fun.” - Jack Hill

if they can laugh. I don't know why, but generation after generation, the movie's popularity is] growing. I'm just blown away. I'm flabbergasted. I just thought, during the making of the movie, that we'd have ourselves a little horror movie, and 'Hey, maybe we could do a sequel!'"

That contemporary critics can be quick to conclude that horror films share a culture of referentiality has always irked Hill. Despite *Spider Baby's* theme song being practically an in-joke in itself, sung by Chaney as a wink to the audience for the sake of his days of *Wolfman* glory, "The idea of post-modern genre kind of baffles me," Hill states. "In those days, if you wanted to get a chance to make any movie at all, you would have to come up with something so different that it would attract attention. Having Lon Chaney [Jr.] in it would at least bring people into the theaters. I never had any intention that it was gonna be anything significant or lasting. I think now that maybe it was just ahead of its time. I don't know what the word is for it. I don't have words for it."

"I don't know what genre I'd get into, exactly," Hill adds, before pausing to offer a close-reading of *Spider Baby*

that he claims to have gathered only through years of passed time. "I think a lot of art is considered 'social comment.' You don't have to understand it, but it's there. I hadn't realized until recently, a few years back, when I would go to conventions and I'd get these 14, 15-year-old girls telling me how much they loved the movie and how they'd show it to all their friends and everything. And I realized that it was about unconditional love: no matter how old you are—if you're a young teenager—you're still loved. I think that's what it's about. It's about other things, I suppose, but that's what it means to me. I didn't have any social comment!," he concludes, laughing heartily.

Hill got nothing more than a kick out of the Academy's restoration and celebration of his "Maddest Story Ever Told" last fall. Still, his willingness to entertain the (now apparent) over-seriousness of our line of questioning at least affords cult cinephile circles the opportunity to bring their own interpretations of *Spider Baby* to the table. "I can't really deal with philosophical questions about social comment or things like that," Hill concedes. "I've never really thought about those things. My work has to be deconstructed by somebody else, not by me. I'm sorry I couldn't give you more. Basically I just did what I thought was fun. But if people enjoy seeing the movie and my presence there, then I'm pleased to do it."

50 years ago, was *Spider Baby* on any film critic's radar? Was Jack Hill determined to inject a satirical edge into his quirky black comedy? Did the film's author displace social anxieties about wartime casualties, or the ill health of America's national body? Does its recent restoration by the cinematic establishment signify some newfound grandiose status of aesthetic importance? All of these questions and others are of little-to-no relevance to Hill. "If this was 50 years ago, this [restoration] might've gotten me a job with the studio," he quips. "But not now."

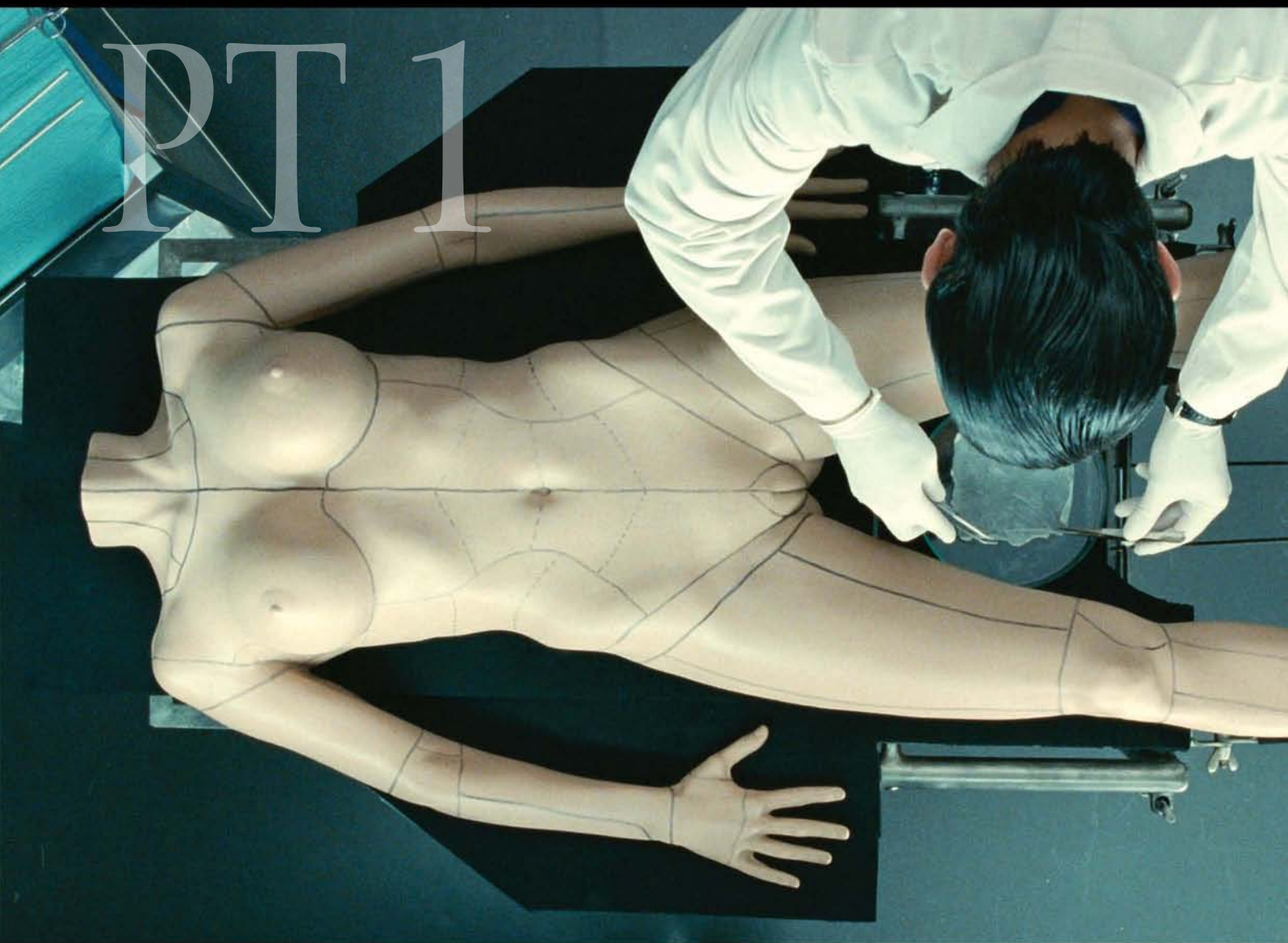
Coming away from the 50th anniversary of *Spider Baby*, we still don't know Jack.



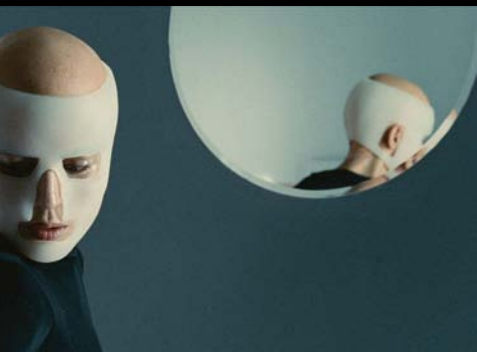
PLASTIC PRI

Pedro Almodóvar's enigmatic surgical horror opus, *The Skin I Live In*, peels back the mask of its heroine's constructed gender, sex, and sexuality.

By Joe Yanick



SON



IN HIS FIRST 17 feature-length films, Pedro Almodóvar's style is primarily informed by the transgression of social norms through comedic and melodramatic means. In many ways, it is Almodóvar's 18th feature, *The Skin I Live In*, that exhibits his largest departure in style and tone, as Almodóvar's first and only foray into the horror genre. The film, which takes many cues from *Frankenstein* (1931) and Georges Franju's *Eyes Without a Face* (1960) among many others, is perhaps Almodóvar's most challenging. *The Skin I Live In* has a complex, Russian nesting doll-esque narrative structure, one that, with each successive layer, reveals only a darker, more multifaceted core. By the film's completion, a sense of narrative closure is achieved, but many of its larger questions are still left ambiguous.

The most rudimentary look at *The Skin I Live In* reveals a deep interest in the relation between power and identity. But through the film's many subplots and twists emerges a complicated meditation on concepts of gender, sex, and sexuality. These issues are only further confounded through *The Skin I Live In*'s relation to the framework of Medical Horror, where the power of the medical practitioner is substituted as a representation of struc-

tural power.

To begin, it is necessary to address the difficulties in discussing issues of gender, sex, and sexuality. The goal of this piece is to address how *The Skin I Live In* relates and responds to not only the history of Medical Horror, but also the social and scientific understanding and construction of gender, sex, and sexuality, and how these can lead to a alienation of members of society who do not fit neatly into societal 'norms.'

For many, the word 'gender' doesn't require a definition. It is a concept that is ingrained in our brains since birth. We are conditioned to believe in a simple binary opposition, a two-gendered reality where there are either men or women. Gender has been a fiercely debated concept in both sociology as well as the medical fields, a discussion that continues to this day.

Advances have lead to the widespread agreement on the differentiation between gender—considered a socially constructed phenomenon—and sex—biologically determined. While this has allowed for greater strides towards disrupting binary identification and revealing the social construction of gender, it has not remained unchallenged. Key to this discussion is Judith Butler's 1990 book

Gender Trouble, a canonical feminist and queer theory text that challenges concepts of gender and sex. For Butler, the distinctions between sex and gender have been muddled, and any recognition of the presupposed biological foundation for defined sexes is challengeable: “If the immutable character of sex is contested,” Butler writes, “perhaps this construct called ‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all.” Butler realizes that there is an inability to talk about “naturalized sexes” without appealing to gendered language. If we cannot talk of sex without using gendered language, then sex is also the subject of a cultural construction.

While Butler’s claims may seem radical, the emergence of *Gender Trouble* coincides with the rise of Blanchard’s Transsexual Typology. While widely critiqued by members of the trans community, Blanchard’s theory has proven to be influential in medical circles. While principally a sexologist, Blanchard’s theories rely on the biological understanding of sex, an understanding that, as demonstrated, is at least subject for reexamination.

For Blanchard, there are only two “types”



of male-to-female transsexuals. The first type are homosexual men who transition to better attract heterosexual men. The second type are what he refers to as autogynephilic (Greek for “to love the image of one self as a woman”), who are men who fetishize over having a normative female body. The criticism of Blanchard’s typology is twofold. First it rejects the feminine essence theory, or the idea of a woman being born in a male body, as dangerous. Second, it supports a sort of binary identification of gender and sexuality, where people are either male or female, homosexuals or “nonhomosexuals.”

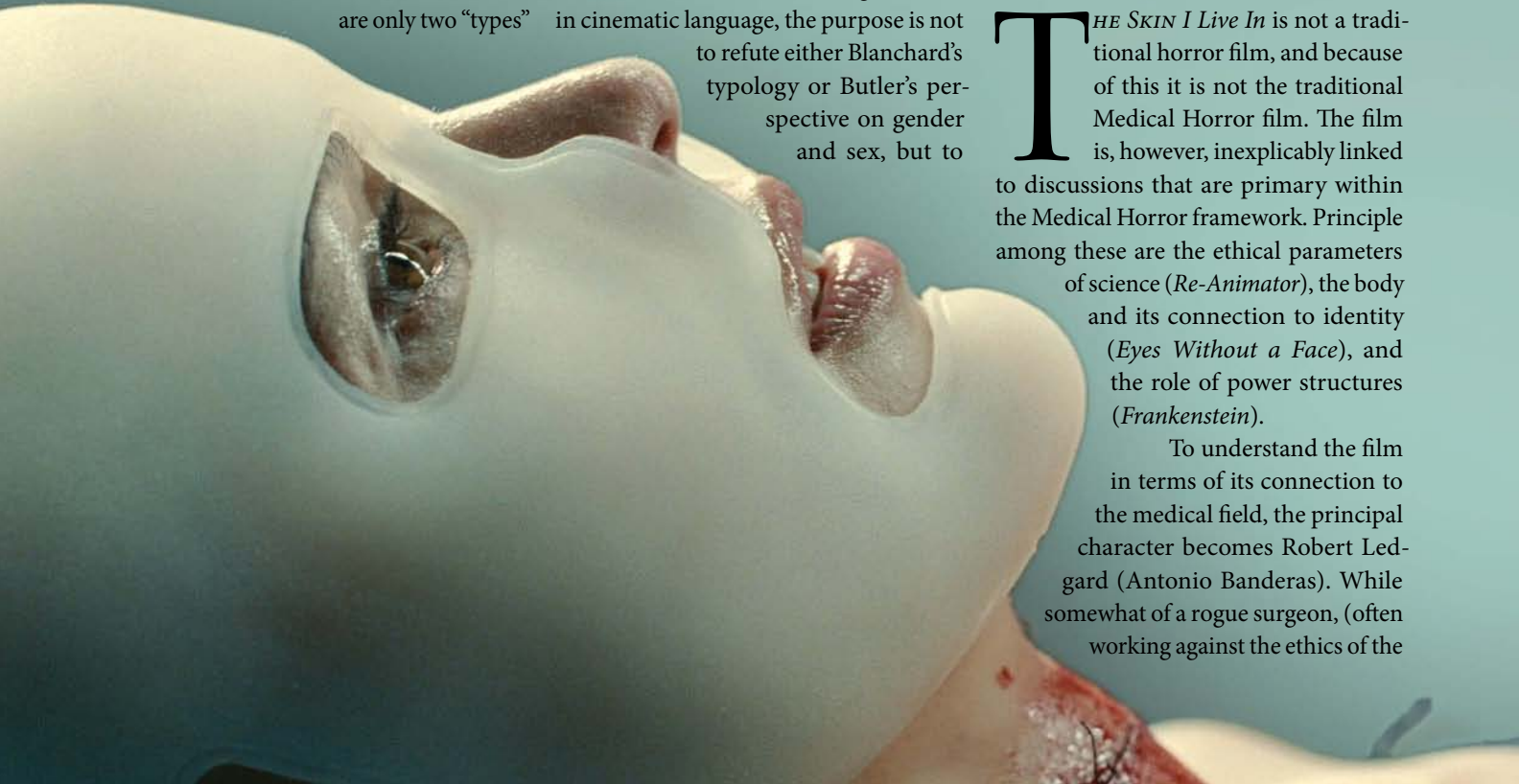
As the interest of this magazine lies in cinematic language, the purpose is not to refute either Blanchard’s typology or Butler’s perspective on gender and sex, but to

place *The Skin I Live In* in the context of this debate. A cursory glance at Almodóvar’s filmography reveals a longstanding interest in the subversion of heteronormative sexuality and gender. *The Skin I Live In* is the sum of all of Almodóvar’s parts, a medley of ideological messages that have been individually strewn across his career.

WHY MEDICAL HORROR?

THE *SKIN I Live In* is not a traditional horror film, and because of this it is not the traditional Medical Horror film. The film is, however, inexplicably linked to discussions that are primary within the Medical Horror framework. Principle among these are the ethical parameters of science (*Re-Animator*), the body and its connection to identity (*Eyes Without a Face*), and the role of power structures (*Frankenstein*).

To understand the film in terms of its connection to the medical field, the principal character becomes Robert Ledgard (Antonio Banderas). While somewhat of a rogue surgeon, (often working against the ethics of the



scientific community) Ledgard remains a representation of the medical institution. Important to note is that Ledgard's opposition to the ethical dimensions of the state-mandated guidelines only comes into play when audiences are led to believe that his intentions are righteous. As he moves closer to the archetypal mad scientist, these concerns become non-existent. For Almodóvar's film, the medical industry becomes a surrogate for the forces of power that determine society, and the medical practitioner (Ledgard) the enforcer of said power.

long process of performing an exhaustive gender reassignment, transitioning Vincente into Vera (Elena Anaya). He then keeps Vera trapped and under constant surveillance, but over the course of the years begins to become infatuated with her. Submitting to his desires, Robert begins a brief affair, which ends when Vera shoots him and escapes. To complicate matters, the film is told out of chronological order; Vera is first introduced as Ledgard's prisoner, and it is not until about halfway through the film that it is revealed that she was originally Vincente.

As early as the title stage, Almodóvar is prepping audiences to see through

Live With" but *The Skin I Live In*.

With the use of harsh stringed instruments—recalling the compositional work of Bernard Herrmann—underlying the images, the film's open mimics that of one its principle referents, *Psycho*. It is in the next shot that Almodóvar introduces the second cinematic link, *Citizen Kane*. However, there is a key distinction between this shot and the opening segment in *Kane*. Cutting from the close-up of Ledgard's estate, "El Cigarrel," to a shot just outside its gate, the camera moves in unison with the barrier until resting in front of the gate. Here, where *Kane's* camera transgresses the blockage by rising above and over the obstruction, Almodóvar has his camera rest and then, with the use of a cut, the camera is within the walls of the gate. The reference to *Psycho* almost bears no explanation; both films study the roles of gender and sex, violence, and sanity. The reference to *Kane*, however, may not be so clear. Just as *Kane* becomes an exercise in breaking through the barriers to get to the heart of Charles Foster Kane, *The Skin* is an exercise in understanding and transgressing the social barriers that dictate norms. This is why Almodóvar's camera cannot be shown overcoming the physical barriers, because the film aims to reveal that these barriers (read: gender, sex) are not physically real but socially constructed. Thus the rupture that is created by having the camera cut from outside the gates to inside the estate reveals the barriers to be malleable...

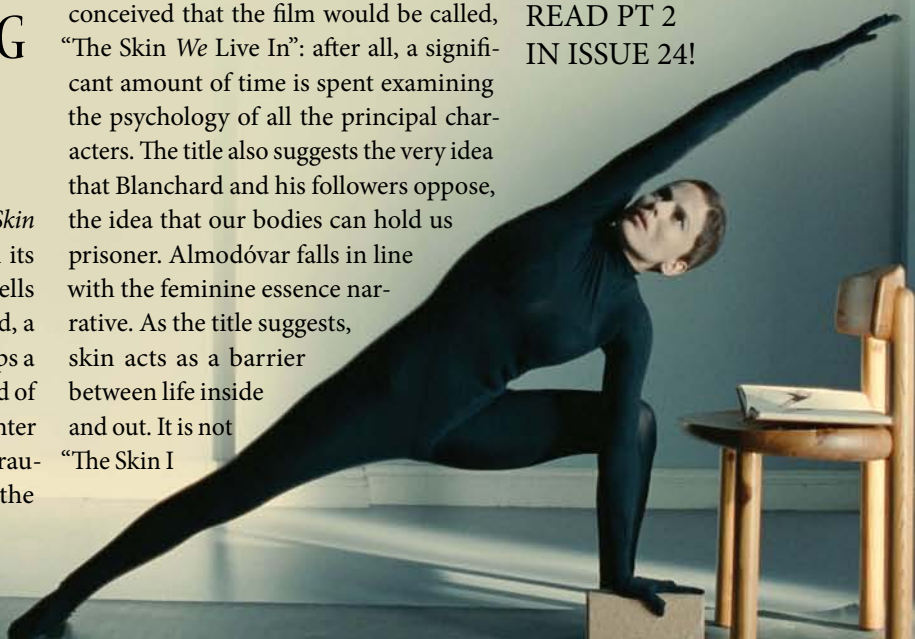
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FORMING THE SKIN: TITLE, CREDITS, AND THE OPENING SEQUENCE

A CONCISE SUMMARY OF *The Skin I Live In* is difficult, but in its simplest form, the film tells the story of Robert Ledgard, a plastic surgeon who kidnaps a man, Vincente (Jan Cornet), suspected of raping his daughter. When his daughter commits suicide as a result of the traumatic experiment, Ledgard begins the

many of the film's facades. The title, *The Skin I Live In*, reveals the film's interest in individualistic identification. As the film, narratively speaking, is not centered on a single character, it could just as easily be conceived that the film would be called, "The Skin We Live In": after all, a significant amount of time is spent examining the psychology of all the principal characters. The title also suggests the very idea that Blanchard and his followers oppose, the idea that our bodies can hold us prisoner. Almodóvar falls in line with the feminine essence narrative. As the title suggests, skin acts as a barrier between life inside and out. It is not "The Skin I





We Love Our Contributors!



Christopher Bruno is a writer and musician currently pursuing his Masters in Cinema Studies at New York University. He can be found cooking breakfast for his wife, tolerating their five cats, and posting irregularly to his website, consideringfilm.com. He has taught digital filmmaking, live broadcast, and graphic design at the high school level and has composed, performed, and released music in a variety of genres under a variety of names. Follow Christopher on Twitter @ConsideringFilm.



Kat Ellinger is a freelance journalist based in the UK who specializes in Euro-cult, classic, gothic, and British horror. When she is not writing for other publications, she curates her website, *The Gore Splattered Corner*.



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Colin J. McCracken is an Irish freelance writer and journalist. He regularly writes about a range of topics, primarily arts and culture, for a number of international magazines, websites and journals. He has an academic background in art, literature and language, and can be found on Twitter @ColinJMcCracken.



Kyle Turner began writing on the internet in 2007 with his blog, *The Movie Scene*. Since then, he has contributed to *TheBlackMaria.org*, *Movie Mezzanine*, *Sound on Sight*, and *IndieWire's /Bent*. He is studying film at the University of Hartford in Connecticut.



Max Weinstein is a writer based in Brooklyn. He is the Editor-in-Chief of *Diabolique*, and his words have appeared online and in print in *Boxoffice*, *Cineaste*, *Fangoria*, *MovieMaker*, *Scream*, *Screen Comment*, and *The Week*. He strongly urges that you listen to Black Sabbath. Follow Max on Twitter @maxlweinstein.



Alexandra West has written about horror films for *Toronto Star*, *Famous Monsters of Filmland* and *Rue Morgue*. She lives, works and survives in Canada.



Jake Whritner is a senior in the Cinema Studies department at New York University. He hopes to pursue his research interests, which include theories of film spectatorship and emotion, at the graduate level. He is also interested in fostering conversation and collaboration between theorists and cognitive neuroscientists.



Joe Yanick is a writer, videographer and film and music critic based in Brooklyn, NY. He is the Web Editor of *Diabolique*, a contributing writer for *Noisey.vice.com*, *Splitsider.com* and *Stagebuddy.com*, and has worked with the Cleveland International Film Festival as a feature reviewer. He is currently a Masters Candidate of Cinema Studies at New York University.

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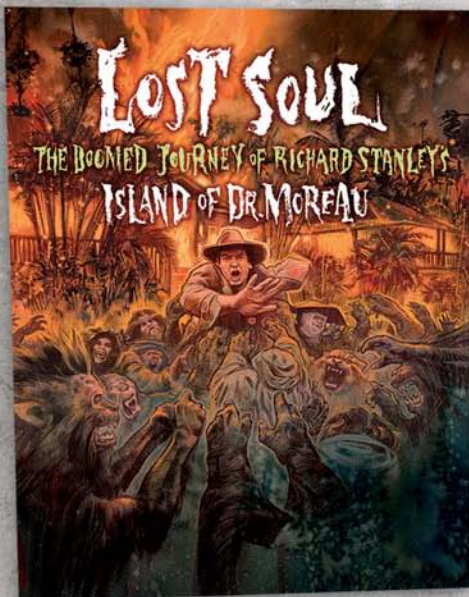
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